

Prelude 2033

Darkness...

I feel myself floating in darkness...

"I wonder if I died again." I asked myself as floated.

"No. You haven't died, but you came close." A disembodied voice answered.

"That voice...it sounds so familiar."

I try to go to the source of the voice but I find I can't move.

"It's okay; just picture yourself reaching out with your hand."

I try picturing reaching with my hand but all I see is the memory of that day twenty one years ago. I couldn't reach her hand then and it seems I can't now.

A slight giggle echoes in the darkness. "I've should've known. I'm sorry. Here let me reach for yours."

The voice spoke to me and I felt a warm gentle hand touch mine and then...

I found myself sitting on a bench in the park where I used to play as a little girl. It was quite bright out and I looked to the sky and what I saw stunned me for a moment. There in the sky were three moons; a red moon, a green moon and a blue moon. I've heard Laetitia and Margaret talk about it but since I couldn't see them I wondered if they were imagining it all. I briefly stared at the moons till I was given a much larger surprise. There standing in front of me with her red hair being blown by unseen winds and her green eyes reflecting the moonlight and with that cryptic smile of hers was Laetitia. I leapt from where I was sitting and I hugged her and I stared into those eyes and spoke with shock in my voice.

"Laetitia?! Is that really you? Where have you've been all these years?! We've been worried about you and..." Her finger reached out and pressed my lips so I could not speak.

"I'm sorry I worried you, but it is me and for various reasons I can't divulge where I'm at and where I've been. I only came back...to see you. I heard what happened and wanted to see if you were okay. You were caught in a terrible explosion when the building you were working at was attacked by terrorists. As of now you're in some kind of mold. I'm not really familiar with all this new technology but that's what I've heard the doctors say..."

Laetitia removed her finger from my lips and gave what she said some thought and then I answered her.

"I should've known you give an answer like that. As for the mold, well it seems I'm getting a new prosthetic body." I said sadly figuring that my first prosthetic body was more or less a pile of pseudo meat and scrap from what I could I gather that a good portion of it was charred.

"Laetitia, I'm glad you're here and all. But how are we communicating?" I asked a bit confused realizing that Laetitia didn't have any cyber wear in her. She smiled with that cryptic smile and answered. "I think you know that answer to that one. I just happen to catch you while you're still lucid dreaming. In a few moments you'll be in a VSR from what I'm hearing now. There's one thing I need to know Elenore; do you forgive me?"

I was confused by her question and quickly answered. "For what Laetitia?"

"For what happened twenty years ago." Laetitia answered a little impatiently.

"I forgave you a long time ago. I'm sorry if I never told you. I always thought you knew."

Laetitia slowly shook her head. "No I didn't. I wish I could stay longer but I have to go. Thank you and Goodbye Elenore. I love you..."

“LAETITIA WAIT!!” I shouted wanting her to stay a few more moments but I could feel myself waking up in a sense as my conscious went into the Virtual Simulated Reality.

In a virtual field of Helianthus flowers a female anime bunny dressed in a maid uniform stood next to a book that was floating head level with her.

As Elenore’s consciousness logged in the VSR the bunny smiled as she appeared.

I looked at my surroundings and found that this was my own VSR. The big tip off was I was wearing the white cocktail dress with the red heels.

“Good Afternoon Miss Elenore. It is good to see that you are functional.” The bunny said in a cheerful tone.

“Good Afternoon Daisy. Can you tell me how long I’ve been unconscious? And why is my personal VSR being used?” I asked a bit puzzled.

Daisy smiled and answered cheerfully and in the most comforting tone she could muster. “You have been unconscious for eighty hours and forty six minutes prior to your log in to this VSR.

Miss Vanessa brought your VSR from home when she heard you were incapacitated. She felt that you needed something “comforting”.

“You have a pre recorded message from Vanessa. You would like to hear it?” Daisy asked cheerfully.

I nodded and a holographic image of Vanessa sprang up.

“Hi there.” Vanessa said with a wave of her hand.

“I know you can’t respond at the moment. I know it’s been awhile since we last spoke. I made some phone calls and they’ll be here soon when you wake up. What you mean there’s a word limit?! With all this techno....” Vanessa cut off abruptly and I had a good giggle.

“Sorry about that Vanessa. “ I said talking to no one.

I smiled and then pondered on how long I had been unconscious and then I asked Daisy another question. (Well a couple of questions.)

“I must’ve taken quite a lot of damage. Has my cyberbrain taken damage for me to be unconscious for this long? And what day is it?”

“From what I gather Miss Elenore you were buried under some rubble for an estimated time of thirty hours before you were found. You went into autistic mode to save energy, as for damage; no cyberbrain damage has been sustained Miss Elenore. To answer your last question Miss Elenore, It is July 6th 2033. Local time is 3:26 P.M.” Daisy replied cheerfully as always.

I stared at the book floating near Daisy’s head, smiled and nodded to myself.

“I didn’t realize it was close to that time again. It’s been a while since I’ve read that book.”

“Is there new data you wish to add Miss Elenore?” Daisy asked.

“No, how long before I fully wake up and can see visitors?”

“In about three hours and forty two minutes till full conscious will be regained Miss Elenore.”

I stared at the virtual book for a bit and walked over. Then I sat down next to Daisy in the virtual flower field, grabbed and opened the book and started to read. The book resembled Margaret’s picture book.

“What did she call it? That’s right...Secondari.” I mused to myself.

“Well since I have some free time on my hands might as well read...read about those days long past...” I said as I began to read from the virtual book. That book... My book...

End Prelude

Chapter 1.
Calm before the storm

If I had really paid attention to what was going elsewhere in the world. I would've been more prepared for the chaos that came to our doorstep. All this started on July 7th 2012, seven days before Margaret's twentieth birthday.

We all wanted to put Gazth-Sonika behind us. We were happy when the civil war ended in cease fire agreement eight months ago and by some miracle it remained intact. In my case I couldn't leave Gazth-Sonika at least mentally (and that caused a lot of grief to everyone around me.)

Elsewhere as we learned later to our regret; Enfant having failed what that madman was trying to do a rival group known as Les Soldats took it as sign of weakness and began an all out shadow war with Enfant. So, in apparent desperation Enfant started to hunt for three artifacts that would turn the war in their favor. Unfortunately for them (and us), Les Soldats found out and decided to hunt for them as well. In the beginning we just took as an increase of criminal violence, not bothering to care as it didn't affect us. (Another decision I and a few others regret.) That was a year and a day ago it all started. So for my piece of mind, I decided to document what had happened.

Taken from the diary of Elenore Baker; July 8th 2013

Friday Monday peered onto the screens in front of him. Reading the reports from his Gazth-Sonika and European agents, he noticed that the Soldats were on the move again. They were trying to get the artifacts before his agents did. He had one advantage though: they thought he was dead and his organization in chaos. That put him and Enfant on their blind side now. The brainless body double he sent to Gazth-Sonika fooled not only Madlax but both the Soldats and their old rivals, The Justicars, as well.

Monday smirked as he continued reading. On the lowest level of this underground fortress, deep in the Amazon basin, not even a nuclear war was a threat to him. It took him many years to complete it but it was worth it. At the very least there wouldn't be any unexpected setbacks in his plan.

In Nafrece, Elenore awoke two hours before she had to wake Margaret. She cleaned herself up and prepared a clean uniform for the day. She almost forgot to put on the suit of body armor. She looked sadly at it and wished silently to herself that she wouldn't have to wear such a thing. But recent events in her life necessitated her to do so if she wanted to protect Margaret.

She put on the armor and then her uniform and prepared for her morning duties. Before she left her room, she looked at the picture of her as a small child, sitting on her grandfather's lap, and she smiled. "I'm doing the best I can, Grandfather..." she whispered to herself and went about her routine and went to wake up Margaret.

"Miss Margaret, time to get up." She said from behind the door. Getting no response, she opened the door and went into the room.

Margaret was still sleeping in her bedroom when she slowly started becoming aware of a familiar voice attempting to wake her up early in the morning.

She turned over, trying to pretend she didn't hear her voice. "Yeah, it's just a dream... I'll just keep sleeping..." She thought to herself half asleep.

Elenore walked to the bed and said in a strident tone. "Miss Margaret, it's time to wake up.

Margaret just draped the covers over her head still wishing that it was a dream and not a wakeup call.

Elenore silently sighed to herself and smiled. They went through this almost every morning and Elenore was glad that this small piece of normalcy...this daily ritual remained intact.

She smiled as she said those familiar words. "So that's how it's going to be. Must I resort to wake up method number three?"

The third time Elenore speaks; some very specific words trigger an immediate response from Margaret: "wake up method number THREE!" She almost immediately gets up upon hearing those words. She tried her best to keep her eyes open and keep up a convincing wake up state.

"Well good morning Miss Margaret." Elenore cheerfully intoned as Margaret rose finishing the ritual.

"I'm awake!" she tries to assure herself as well as Elenore, by saying it out loud. "Can I go back to sleep now?" she asks with a sleepy voice still not entirely aware of what's going on.

"No Miss Margaret. It's time to get up. You're the one who asked me to wake you early so you could go shopping today. Elenore said responding to Margaret's plea.

"I did? Hmm... Oh right! I don't have to go to university today. Why else would I get up early?" Margaret concluded.

Elenore then prepared Margaret's clothing and made sure that she didn't fall asleep while dressing.

Then she went and woke Laetitia up and got her ready for the day. Though Elenore usually didn't need wake her as she rose early, sometimes before her! Then she went and made breakfast. After her usual morning routine of struggling to stay awake she got all set and went downstairs to join Elenore and Laetitia for breakfast.

Margaret really enjoyed having Laetitia with them. She never experienced having a younger sister, so it was a new experience for her and somewhat of a challenge. Even though it didn't take long for them to familiarize and become strongly attached to each other. It sure put a bit of a pressure on her at times, to improve as a person and be somewhat of a good example for the younger child, but at least she still had Elenore around which surely made things a lot easier for the both of them.

The course of events in Gazth-Sonika some months ago changed her a bit. And that forced her to become a bit more responsible and self aware. But she still felt a bit lost at times, especially when she had the feeling that Laetitia had a deep understanding of most things, which sometimes surpassed her own. She sure wasn't a regular child, but Margaret couldn't let herself fall behind, for she was determined to improve, still feeling slightly guilty for all the trouble she unintentionally caused to a lot of people for a long time.

But the end of the civil war finally put an end to that chapter in her life, so Margaret could finally overcome her past and start focusing on the present and future. Today was yet another bright new day ahead! But she was still feeling sleepy, and could hardly hide it, while reaching the breakfast table and taking a seat. Some things just never change.

After serving Margaret and Laetitia, Elenore sat down and joined them for breakfast.

Elenore couldn't help but look at the newest member of her "family". This small child had been with her at the end her life. And holding her was her last memory before waking in a hospital bed in Gazth-Sonika.

Even during her convalescence she was there alongside Margaret. Her mind wandered back to that time; She remembered waking up to see Margaret sitting there crying and holding her hand.

Though she was a bit groggy, she could hear Margaret's voice clearly. "Elenore you're awake! I'm so sorry for what happened to you. You don't have to say anything. I wanted to apologize for my behavior. I also said some terrible things to you as well. I'm terribly sorry for that as well. Could you ever forgive me? I'll understand if you don't."

She squeezed Margaret's hand and smiled the best she could. "Margaret...you are my family... I...forgive you" She remembered saying, she also remembered drifting back to sleep but not before noticing Laetitia. Elenore smiled the best she could and said; "You..."

"Hello Elenore" Laetitia said to her before she drifted back to sleep.

Elenore....

Elenore....

Elenore snapped back to now to hear Laetitia calling out to her.

"Yes Laetitia?"

"Are you ok?" Laetitia asked with some concern not usually noticed on a child her age.

Elenore smiled and answered. "Yes Laetitia. I'm all right thank you for asking. Is there anything you need Laetitia?"

"No, just asking if you were ok." Laetitia smiled and then looked at Margaret who was half asleep then back at Elenore.

Elenore quietly sighed and smiled. "Miss Margaret please don't fall asleep while eating."

Laetitia giggled at this scene watching Margaret wake up or sleep eating, even she couldn't tell.

Elenore smiled at Margaret. At least some things were back to normal.

On the other side of the world in Gazth-Sonika; Madlax had been staring into the clear night sky out of her run-down Gazth-Sonika apartment for an hour now. She had been waiting for Three-Speed's call for months but the recent cease-fire had really stifled the need for great agents such as her.

Peering back onto the half-eaten hamburger on the table and pondering into the wonderful world of Europe Vanessa described to her. She wondered if she had been ripped off by Three-Speed all these years. "I wonder if Three-Speed is living the good life with a penthouse in the Bahamas right now."

Madlax sighed. "Maybe it's time to take a chance and travel to Europe, yep and some great pasta!" she smiled.

From the new Manor Altena read the reports with some concern. She had figured with Friday Monday eliminated in Gazth-Sonika, Enfant would be easy to crush, but events had proven otherwise. They were interfering with her plans to bring about the Le Grande Retour and THAT was intolerable. She wondered who was leading Enfant now.

Chloe noticed the expression on her face. "Lady Altena what troubles you?" She asked with concern on her face.

"My dear Chloe it appears that those infidels from Enfant are causing some problems." Altena replied with a warm smile.

"Is there anything you wish me to do Lady Altena?" Chloe asked.

Altena smiled "Not at the moment my sweet child. When the time comes I will let you know. But for now I need you to go to Nafrece."

Chloe silently nodded and went to prepare.

Despite Limelda's reservations that she go to Europe for a better life. Madlax took her bags and flew into Nafrece. On arrival she found her combat skills and the money she earned amidst the chaos of Gazth-Sonika counted for nothing in this expensive and serene city.

"Luciano, why did you want to live in a place like this? Too peaceful. Oh well at least I can go and do some window shopping." Madlax thought to herself as the leaves whistled in the background.

Madlax gazed through the shops and sprawling cafes with people idly chatting sprinkled with the smell of fresh coffee. Nothing seemed out of sorts except the exorbitant prices and this rather astonished Madlax.

"Wow 300 Yurs for that dress! With that money I could buy enough dresses for a lifetime of fighting in Gazth-Sonika! Oh but I'm a poor girl here. I wonder where Margaret Burton is." She pondered.

As she was about to turn left onto another street, Madlax took an apple from her jacket and closed her eyes to take a bite. In an unusual case of carelessness she bumped into another blonde girl wearing a black mini-skirt and high heels.

"Are you trying to steal my handbag?" the blonde woman sneered with a cold stare.

"I wouldn't steal that! Besides that looks rather cheap" Madlax with her head tilted high.

"You're the cheap one and rather filthy." the blonde woman said quite angrily.

"Aw I am. But you don't have to be so mean about it" Madlax said, clutching the apple near her chest.

Madlax sensed this blonde woman was certainly no ordinary person; she seemed athletic and always had her right hand close to her pink and white handbag. She must have a gun in there; her senses seemed very deadly, sharp and probing.

Suddenly a little Asian girl with black hair wearing a white jacket said rather hurriedly. "Oh sorry, please excuse us. My friend is having a bad day." and the two girls walked off rather suspiciously to an alley across the other side of the road.

Madlax was no fool, she sensed the two girls were being followed and they knew it. The three men in black suits and the sunglasses she caught on the back of her eye were probably trouble.

"Not as peaceful as I thought" Madlax whispered to herself and continued towards downtown as she could see towards the horizon.

Mireille and Kirika walked down the alley, both pulling their guns out. Then they split in opposite directions as the three men following them started shooting at them.

Mireille ducked behind a dumpster and from there started shooting hitting one of the men and at the same time Kirika ducked into a doorway and fired. She killed both of the remaining quickly. Mireille came from the side of the dumpster towards Kirika.

"You know with their war with Enfant, you figure they wouldn't have time to hunt us down." Mireille said with a sigh. "Perhaps they don't want us joining Enfant, so to eliminate that possibility they decided to get rid of us." Kirika replied.

"That might be true. But in any case we should lay low for awhile." Mireille replied and the two of them walked hurriedly down the alley.

The remotest sound of gunfire had Madlax excited and she ran towards the alley the two women were a few seconds ago. As Madlax suspected the three men lay dead on the cobbled street.

"9mm round, perfectly aimed in the heart and a quick clean escape. Very professional" Madlax thought after observing the bullet wounds.

Madlax stared into the wall and wondered why the men were after two innocuous looking women (at first glance anyway). She scoured through the suits of the dead men for clues, but found nothing extraordinary except the photographs of the women before and a little notebook.

She quickly browsed through the scribbled notes which seemed written in a secret code. But one part was written in a language she could understand, a list of names.

The police sirens were growing louder in the background and Madlax continued in the direction she originally intended. Hmm, Yuumura Kirika, Mireille Bouquet, Douglas Rosenberg and then someone she

knew; Carrosea Doone! And then two secret words in an illegible language but they seemed important as they were circled and written in a far bigger font.

"I wonder what this is about..." Madlax whispered surprised as she turned the next page.

"More secret words and then more names; Jodie Hayward, Vanessa Rene and Margaret Burton!" she exclaimed. "I better find them soon. I don't like the look of this." Madlax said to herself, hoping inside she wasn't too late.

Elenore cleared the dishes from the table and started washing them. Now and then she would turn her head to see if anyone was behind her.

Every time she did and saw no one she breathed a sigh of relief.

Everything was back to normal.

Back to her normal simple way of life;

No madmen hurting those she loved,

No wandering around in jungles,

And no dead friends.

All was normal.

Then she heard footsteps behind her. She grabbed a kitchen knife and quickly spun around only to see Laetitia with not look of shock but a look of genuine concern on her face.

"Are you okay Elenore?" She asked genuinely concerned.

Elenore looked at her and then at the knife dripping with soapy water. She quickly put it in the sink.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you Laetitia. I was just started that's all. Is there anything the matter or need?"

Elenore quickly replied trying to calm herself more than she was Laetitia.

"No, I wanted to see if you were okay and see if you were done. Besides Margaret is getting impatient."

Laetitia said in a calm tone noticing the anxiety on Elenore's face.

Elenore smiled trying to hide the anxiety that was written all over her face. "I'm fine Laetitia, thanks for asking though. This won't take long and we'll be on our way."

Laetitia smiled and cheerfully replied. "Okay." And she walked away. As soon as Elenore's back was turned she glanced at her. The smile faded and was replaced with concern.

"*Her body has healed, but has her mind and spirit?*" She thought to herself and decided to tell Margaret to convince Elenore to seek help.

She walked up to Margaret who was waiting for Elenore. "I'm worried about Elenore. Laetitia said in a concerned tone.

"Hmm... well, she has been acting a little weird lately. On the surface she's the same old Elenore as always. But I too can sense something different about her at times. Ever since we got back from Gazth-Sonika. I just hope it's nothing too serious. I'd like to help somehow. Maybe I should confront her about it..." Margaret replied trying to allay Laetitia.

"You know she'd deny it. She wouldn't want you worrying like that." said Laetitia in a matter of fact tone.

"I guess... It's times like this I wish Vanessa was around. She'd know exactly what to say or do. And I'm sure Elenore would listen to her... we haven't heard from her ever since she left Nafrece for work, two weeks ago, I wonder where did she go and what is she doing..." She thought out loud momentarily forgetting that Laetitia was standing right in front of her.

"Oh. You have something in mind?" Laetitia asked snapping Margaret back to reality.

"Oh it's nothing... Don't worry! I'll try to approach the problem soon, somehow. For now we'll just have to try not causing her any additional stress okay?" Margaret proposed decidedly.

"That's more directed at you than me, I would say..." Laetitia answered playfully.

"Awww, you don't have to put it like that!" Margaret protested in embarrassment as they both broke into giggles.

"Okay, let's just get going at once! You ready now Elenore?" Margaret called cheerfully from the living room.

"Yes Miss Margaret!" Elenore replied carrying Margaret's and Laetitia's jackets in her arms. She had on her shawl over her uniform and handed Margaret her jacket and then helped Laetitia put her jacket on. All the while she had a smile on her face but her eyes told a different story. As they left the house, she locked the door her back towards Margaret. She checked the pocket of her apron for the can of pepper spray, breathing a sigh of relief. She turned with a smile on her face.

"Where to Miss Margaret?" She asked cheerfully as they headed down the street.

Margaret Burton was about to move. No matter how hard Monday stared at his chessboard, she wasn't on it. That crazy witch was just too difficult to handle, like catching a tiger with his bare hands. Take too long and she'll bite your head off. The chess pieces were not aligning well. With only two sides on the board, it wasn't possible to model the real world. He knew so he bent the rules. The white queen had just been reduced back to a pawn. His fool of a son killed by some bounty hunter in the Andes. It took him a month's worth of mana reserves to resurrect him.

Then, he lost the white bishop in Gazth-Sonika. It was a shame. The Bishop had the Gift and he was smart. Batshit insane, alright, but he got the job done. The new Bishop was an optimist and if all worked out well he should keep the Soldats preoccupied while he went for his true objective. He needed a new queen though. And he had the candidate in mind.

Altena stared at the chess board. She was looking at the Queen's Knight Pawn and wondered when she would move and would her knight follow like the last time. This pawn became a Queen then back to a pawn and brought back her knight as well. But she wasn't really interested in the pawn but in the knight. Granted the pawn had her uses. From what she read in the reports from South America and Europe she might become useful soon. She knew the knight might interfere with her plans so she had to think of another way to remove the knight without actually removing it. Then she looked at the letter next to the chessboard. It was a letter addressed to Margaret Burton to be given to her on her twentieth birthday. Altena smiled and looked at the chess board moving a black Bishop.

In downtown Nafrece Chloe opened the envelope that she was given by the Soldat courier. Inside there were was photo of Margaret Burton and Elenore Baker. Another photo was of Elenore standing alone. Also there were instructions from Altena.

My Dear Chloe,

I need you to watch these two women and report their moves to me. Do not be seen nor engage unless absolutely necessary. I know this may tedious but it is important. If any Enfant agents approach them feel free to kill the agents. Additional instructions will arrive as the situation progresses. I am counting on you so please don't disappoint me my dear Chloe.

Chloe read the letter and wondered to herself why Altena didn't assign a regular Soldat to keep a watch. But then she reasoned that Altena must have a good reason for her to do this. She looked at the photos and from what the courier told her that they should be coming to where she was at soon...

"Let's go to that new place downtown. We've never been there before. I think it will be fun." Margaret suggested and they followed. It was a nice day out so they decided to walk there. They were in no hurry after all. It was nice to spend some free time like this, just the three of them.

University wasn't as easy as back in high school. When she could sleep in class and somehow get away with it. She came to realize. So, granted she was no genius, studying had significantly taken up a lot of her free time during the week now just to keep up with classes. Any free time she could spend leisurely together with her family was a lot more precious to Margaret now. Not to mention after the experience of almost losing everyone she loved. She naturally came to cherish everyday with them more than before.

There was one person she had been missing though: Madlax. They haven't met again ever since they said goodbye back in Gazth-Sonika. She obviously shared a special connection with her too and in a way, she was as much like a sister to her as Laetitia or Elenore. She couldn't help but get lost in thought at times; wondering where she could be and what was she doing... She had entertained the idea of having her live with them in Nafrece (Vanessa would probably like having her around too.). But she imagined it would be extremely hard for Madlax to adapt to such a peaceful easy going lifestyle... maybe.

Besides, she did left with that scary person last time they parted. Margaret could never comprehend what kind of relationship they shared. But it was definitely something behind her understanding. Surely, the list of things that were behind Margaret's understanding wasn't all that small, so she didn't gave it much thought and trusted Madlax must know what she's doing.

As they arrived downtown and looked around for a while Margaret started feeling a strangely familiar presence really close to them. Was this just a coincidence or did her earlier reminiscence was a bit too suggestive and got her imagining things? She stopped walking suddenly, leaving Elenore and Laetitia a bit ahead, and turned around to face the blond figure that was now standing before her, looking as surprised to meet among the crowd as she was.

"Madlax? Is that you?"

As she followed Margaret, making sure that Laetitia kept up with them. She tried to relax and relish the free time she had with Margaret now that she was going to university. She wondered if Margaret really understood the meaning of her last words to her. Granted she asked herself this question many times before but with Margaret's free time dwindling due to her studies, the question reappeared. She remembered asking her if she knew what she meant by "my family" and her reply was,"We're like sisters." and part of her wept inside.

When they got back from Gazth-Sonika, Margaret told her the truth about everything including what really happened to her father and her connection to Madlax and Laetitia. She understood why she did what she did and gave her all the love and support she needed.

Due to the answer Margaret gave to her question, she decided not divulge her true feelings for her along with the fact that she fell off an over hundred and fifty foot cliff when she got shot (as not increase Margaret's guilt over her death). The truth was; she was truly in love with Margaret and implications that it implied (she wondered if Margaret had any inkling about that too, considering she told no one.)

Granted she didn't worry as much when Margaret went to university as it had excellent security (she made sure of that!). But going into a public space like this did worry her and her eyes darted back and forth looking for unseen enemies and she tensed up. But then she felt a small hand grasp hers and she felt like she did when she was a small girl; at peace and calm. (Elenore didn't know on a conscious level but Laetitia had linked her psyche to hers but the only part she could reach was when Elenore was eight years old, so when Laetitia grabbed her hand all that Laetitia saw was the child that Elenore was, not the troubled adult that she wanted to help.)

They unknowingly passed Margaret who had suddenly stopped and they didn't notice for a little over a minute that she wasn't with them. Elenore's heart began to beat faster as she let go of Laetitia's hand when she realized Margaret wasn't with them. Images of herself wandering the jungle flashed in Elenore's mind. She tried to keep from panicking at least not in front of Laetitia.

Laetitia saddened as she lost the link. She would have get help if she wanted to make the link stronger and she knew who to ask, but she hadn't seen him in either of his personas. She knew he was alive but she wondered if he felt unworthy to be near Margaret, of course then there was the issue of Elenore having a real (but deserved) dislike for him. But it was worth a shot. She had to do something, Vanessa wasn't around and Margaret would just keep running into Elenore's great wall of denial. Suddenly she felt a familiar presence, so she turned her head and saw...

Elenore looked to the left and right of her, and then behind her...And there standing in front of Margaret was Madlax. She wondered what she was doing in Nafrece.

"Hopefully she's just here to visit Margaret and Laetitia... (Granted she didn't get a chance to be close to her, but she did admire the woman though her occupation did bother her a little)." She thought to herself as she and Laetitia who was all smiles went towards the pair.

Madlax smiled happily and replied "Of course it is me. Aren't I glad to see you? "

"What are you doing here?" Margaret asked.

"I'm looking for a change of scene. I've never traveled or worked in Europe before. "Madlax said with a tinge of embarrassment.

This was the first time Madlax had met Margaret since the epic day she fused with her and Laetitia. She felt again that same sense of warmth in her heart as if she found a side to her that she thought she never had.

Margaret was like a good little sister and the kind words she spoke to her back in Gazth-Sonika resonated ever since. But at the same time Margaret was rather distant, her world, her manners were perplexing.

Madlax sensed a little tug on her jacket and peered down. "Hello little Laetitia" she said happily and patted her little head. Laetitia said cheerfully "Welcome big Madlax". Madlax turned her left hand on her waist, just privately checking the young one was referring to her height and not about the extra pounds from the lack of work.

She intuitively felt it was most likely the former but she always worried a little about her lovely figure. But the remarked change in Laetitia pleased her the most, the young child she was now contrasted with the sad and troubled soul when she first met her. She was having a proper childhood, something she can only dream of herself.

Elenore walked up alongside Margaret and watched Madlax pat Laetitia on the head.

"Don't I get a pat too?" She said jokingly with a little sarcasm thrown in.

She noticed Madlax was looking her over. Inside she wanted to give her a hug and ask her a few questions. But this was not the time or the place for that. It would be unprofessional to show such casual emotions while on duty and her duty was to watch over Margaret and now Laetitia and THAT came first.

Madlax sensed the discomfort behind the smile of the maid who fought alongside her for Margaret.

"Post war stress? No, that doesn't seem to be it" She thought. *"Still, there's a certain strength about her. And neatness as well her shawl and maid uniform immaculate as usual. Unless she packed on a few extra pounds or she's wearing body armor underneath that uniform."* She also thought noticing Elenore's uniform.

"If you really want one, I can give it to you Elenore." Madlax teased back then she felt a tinge; it felt purple. Like Limelda but much darker. The air seemed a little uneasy; the thought of the two women and the notebook reappeared in her mind, there was an undercurrent of violence in her veins even in such a jovial place. *"It's best to go indoors and escape any eyes peering around. Besides, the shops here are beautifully decorated with gold trim and that long beautiful red silk dress and red shoes out that the antique window of the shop opposite the café is tempting. I can even smell pasta coming from that direction."* Madlax thought as she assessed the situation. "Let's go into the shops Margaret and do some shopping?" She casually suggested hoping that would throw off whoever was watching them.

Laetitia smiled; she was happy to see her again. The three of them reunited again after a fashion. She was going to ask if she had seen Vanessa on her travels but she was interrupted by Elenore's amusingly sarcastic question. Laetitia giggled and then she felt a couple of strong presences nearby. One was dark; just dark she couldn't find out anything else but it did bring a sense of dread, but the other was familiar and it was very close by. *"He's here! Poupee is here!"* Laetitia thought as her heart raced in joy. *"Now only if I could slip away long enough to talk to him."* She added silently to herself. When she heard Madlax's suggestion she smiled.

"Perhaps I'll get my chance after all..."

From a distance Chloe watched them. She studied them until they went into the shops; she didn't know why Lady Altena wanted Margaret Burton or Elenore Baker watched. Margaret seemed like a total air head to her and Elenore seemed to be a little stuck up. But Chloe knew that appearances could be deceiving. But the blond hair girl with them could pose a problem. It could be a lot easier if she could just kill them, but she dared not disobey Lady Altena so she continued to watch; besides it might get interesting she mused to herself.

In the nearby café Nakhl contemplated to herself. *" Impressions - I had always been taught to have impressions; deep feelings which beget instinctive choices. Yet the impression of this city of dark alleyways, dark shadows, dark hearts, was indistinct. Everything seemed so muddy - so many troubled lives, caught in a web of improbabilities. Why was I here? I was here of my own choosing. But why I made that choice, I cannot say."*

Nakhl had forsaken her normal costume for something...less evidently foreign, but she still felt as a stranger. Dressing in a skirt suit just made her more uncomfortable than she already was. She dipped her bread into the oil and vinegar and took it to her mouth. She wasn't hungry, but she had other reasons for being in the dim-lit cafe. But again, she wasn't sure what those reasons were herself.

She glanced about herself. Outside sat Carrossea, his eyes fixed on his coffee with a brooding look. His very existence was a contradiction. Then she heard the footsteps of another whom she knew. One...or perhaps three, that didn't matter. It was three pairs in one, a trinity of sorts - it was the same step. And it was drawing nearer. Her heart rose, for her presence had always given her joy and peace.

But something else was drawing near; something she had not encountered before, yet important...
Darkness...

Nakhl closed her eyes, for her senses would tell her no more.

Darkness...from far away...from another hemisphere, another age. A darkness that blocked the light and enshrouded the world. This, also...it was inconsistent...

Purple...The thought of the color made her reopen her eyes. The brightness struck her, and into view came three pairs of red shoes, walking briskly along the pavement outside. Carrossea continued to focus on his coffee - no, on himself - unnoticing. She wondered how long that would last. The trio seemed to be in joyful conversation. She wondered how long that would last, too. She wondered if she felt what she felt. And wondered how much Margaret Burton's choices had disturbed or accelerated the natural entropy of time and space.

Red shoes under a blue sky, like the bowl of oil and vinegar, mingled but did not mix...that was the proper order of things.

But purple...

Nakhl paid her bill and rose to her feet, instinctively feeling for the dagger behind her back which was not there. So many things were not right...

...And yet, it was good to be back. She thought to herself.

As the four of them went into the store, Laetitia kept her eyes on the door looking for an opportunity to go. It was hard considering Elenore was keeping an eye on her, for one who didn't possess the Gift she was highly perceptive. She had to be considering Margaret kept her in nearly constant practice. All it took was a moment...Margaret and Madlax distracted Elenore (did they know what she intended she wondered) and she was out the door passing a random customer and rushed as fast her small legs could carry her to the cafe across from the store.

She could smell pasta being served as she approached but something else immediately drew her attention. There walking on towards her was a woman she recognized, even though she was dressed differently. It was the apprentice to Quanzitta; she stopped briefly as she passed.

"You're far away from home. I would love to talk with you but I'm in a hurry. We can talk later." She said cheerfully and ran towards the table where Carrossea was sitting.

Carrossea felt a presence, a familiar one and looked to see Laetitia running towards him. In a mindscape his other persona stared in somewhat shock as she came running up to him. She embraced him crying.

"Poupee! I missed you so much! I thought I lost you forever."

Poupee smiled and hugged Laetitia. "I missed you too, Laetitia. But what you're doing is dangerous. There are people after us and I don't want you to get hurt."

For a moment Laetitia was in shock, this was the first time he had ever spoken. With tears in her eyes she looked up to him smiling.

"Oh Poupee, you spoke!" She ecstatically said as she felt the bond between them returning.

In the real world Carrossea was at a loss, here was this small child hugging him crying.

He stroked her hair and looked into her eyes with a look of compassion and concern.

"What he said was true. This is very dangerous; you should be with Margaret or that *maid*."

"I don't care right now, I'm just happy to see you again Poupee."

Carrossea sighed and smiled. "My name is Carrossea in this form, but I'll let it pass.

Inside Carrossea was ecstatic; if she was here so was Margaret and he could see her once again. But that also meant that she would deal with *her* as well, it was a small price to pay to see Margaret but well worth it.

Carrossea pulled a chair out and sat Laetitia in it.

"Let's wait for Margaret, since this place serves pasta I'm sure come right here if not sooner." He said smiling and then he sighed. "No wait *she'll* be here before Margaret and I just imagine her reaction."

Laetitia smiled. "Pou...I mean Mr. Carrossea; I have a favor to ask but you may not like it."

"Of course, what is it?" He replied wondering what Laetitia going to ask.

Laetitia explained the situation with Elenore and the link she had on and off established with her.

Carrossea's initial reaction when he heard her mentioned was total shock mixed with annoyance, but he held no malice towards her he just found her extremely annoying and now Laetitia was asking to help form a link with her. Part of him didn't want to but he couldn't say no to Laetitia and besides helping her would most likely put in him in Margaret's good graces plus the through the link he could keep a eye on Margaret and annoy the maid at the same time.

Carrossea sighed and smiled. "I can't say "no" to you can I?"

Laetitia smiled and cheerfully said. "Thank you Mr. Carrossea."

Back in the mindscape Laetitia hugged Poupee ecstatically. "Thank you Poupee!"

Poupee hugged Laetitia and smiled. "You're Welcome. Now all we have to do wait for her to show up."

Laetitia nodded as she held Poupee tight.

Back in the real world;

"You're welcome Laetitia. But I really think you should get back before she notices you're gone. Just bring them here and I'll help with the rest. Laetitia nodded and ran back to the store and slipped in just as Elenore noticed she wasn't near her. "Oh there you are Laetitia. Please Laetitia, please don't go wandering off."

"I'm sorry Elenore." Laetitia said relieved that she didn't notice she was gone.

"Just please stay with us okay." Elenore said with a smile. But deep inside a part of her panicked...

"Okay, let's go!" Margaret replied happily not even noticing that Laetitia had left and returned. They left the store and the four of them followed down the long crowded avenue of stores and cafes. This was such an unexpected surprise, to think Madlax would travel all the way to Nafrece without letting them know beforehand, but it was also one of those things about Madlax that Margaret could understand and relate to. Sometimes, they just set their mind on something and followed their instinct without much planning or consideration. It might seem a bit strange or reckless to act this way (one of the things about her personality that made Elenore worry about regularly, Margaret assumed), but despite her spacey personality, there were a few times when Margaret could see things clearly and understand them beyond appearances. It was this sort of instinct, which she knew Madlax also had, despite not possessing the Gift.

To meet for chance like this was definitely odd, but Margaret didn't really give it much thought, nor did she seem to find it all that weird. She had always been unsuspecting about coincidences and for now she would rather focus on the moment. Meeting Madlax was just one more reason to enjoy such an already bright day.

It felt very different to meet Madlax under such peaceful circumstances and even be able to spend such a calm casual time just chatting and walking around from store to store. It really contrasted with those dangerous moments they shared back in Gazth-Sonika. Madlax always appeared to keep it cool and sharp back then, under the occupation as agent she was so used to, but she seemed pretty comfortable now too, just enjoying a normal moment of peace. "She might actually like it here." Margaret thought optimistically.

"Hmm... so, where should we go?" Margaret asked undecided, "I actually never been to this part of town before."

"Well, don't look at me, I just got here... Besides, you're the one paying cuz I'm absolutely broke! So I'll go wherever you invite me to." Madlax joked teasingly.

"Heh, sure. What do you think Elenore? Any suggestions?"

"Well, Miss Margaret that's absolutely up to you, but I'm pretty sure you'd like some place that serves pasta." Elenore pointed out knowingly.

"Pasta!" Margaret and Madlax exclaimed simultaneously, barely holding their enthusiasm, before looking at each other and letting out a small chuckle. "What about that place?" said Laetitia pointing to an Italian restaurant with an outdoor cafe, "I'd like to go there!" she eagerly insisted pulling Margaret's hand. "Okay, it's decided then. We'll go there after we go to a couple more stores." Margaret smiled trying to decide which store to go to next.

"I'll reserve us a table Miss Margaret." Elenore added.

"Great! We'll meet you there." Margaret replied and Elenore went to the restaurant.

"Oh by the way, Madlax" she addressed her on their way down the street, "are you staying somewhere yet? It would be great if you could stay at our place! We could go there after lunch and get you settled if you want!"

"I will love to stay. I heard you live in a very big house." Madlax replied ecstatically. Madlax happily tagged along with Margaret as Elenore made reservations at the cafe, the avenue was classy with an old World charm. *"Not something you find in Gazth-Sonika, not even the shopping complex next to the classy five star hotel where I met Carrossea and gagged that hotel maid. Poor girl, luckily I let her go although I had to threaten her not to talk about it."* She thought.

But the negative thoughts and feelings of the civil war especially that masked villain Friday Monday drifted away as Madlax got further immersed into all the cafés with people happily drinking fresh coffee and all the dazzling natural light from shop windows selling handbags, clothes and red shoes! "Buying another pair?" Madlax asked Margaret jokingly.

"No, tearing another dress?" Margaret replied cleverly as she observed Madlax staring at another long dress with considerable affection. Madlax noticed a sudden tug around her waist and turned around. Laetitia was slightly bored with all this shopping for fashion accessories and pointed in the direction of the antique doll shop on the far opposite corner. She smiled happily and said "Margaret, Laetitia wants to do a little shopping of her own". Margaret gladly agreed and started walking leisurely. The mood was rather relaxed and calm but somehow this made Madlax even more alert. Every movement felt in slow motion, she could even sense Nakhl was creeping nearby. But none of this bothered her at all. "What a lovely day to just be casual and relax." Margaret said while she stretched her arms and yawned.

"Welcome young ladies" the old shopkeeper greeted with an air of humility.

The old shopkeeper was an old lady slowly sewing a broken doll with her worn but experienced hands. Madlax peered around the shop there was every antique doll possible, some had rather worn clothes, and others were still pristine with dresses from a bygone era. At the back of the shop, the area was dimly light an old man was playing chess by himself with some antique dolls on an antique wooden board.

"What are you doing? Madlax asked curiously.

"Seeing how the game is played." the old man answered enigmatically.

Laetitia noticed a rather old doll, the color was worn but the doll wore a rather distinctive velvet cloak with purple rags and the hair had a bright orange to it. The more she looked at it the more she sensed it had a part it had yet to play.

"I want to buy this one" Laetitia jumped with joy hoping that would cover up her real intention.

"That's a rather special doll; we put a bit of patchwork on that one. It has a special history its rumored to have been in a couple of warzones." the old woman said rather nostalgically.

Margaret found this intriguing but didn't think much of it and paid the old woman and waved goodbye as she gave the doll to Laetitia.

"Let's get back to the cafe I'm starving" Madlax said casually and as Margaret and Laetitia raced ahead.

Elenore got to the restaurant and she asked for a table. The waiter brought her to a table with four chairs.

At table next to theirs, she saw him...and a part of her seethed. But she kept her calm and tried to ignore him, hopefully he wouldn't recognize her, but...

"Hello Miss Baker, what a pleasant surprise to see you here."

"Let the games begin..." Carrossea thought to himself.

"Hello Mr. Doone. I doubt very much that you're surprised." Elenore said annoyed that he had noticed her.

Carrossea smirked. "Oh but I am. Who would've guessed the first familiar face I would see on my return to Nafrece would be your smiling face."

"BASTARD! He knows I won't make a scene here. I would just love to kick that smug smirk off his face, but what would Miss Margaret think... Elenore thought to herself.

"I doubt that as well Mr. Doone. Every time you show up, trouble manages follow right behind you. Perhaps you should go elsewhere before it finds you."

Carrossea smirked even more and replied in mock surprise. "Why Miss Baker, why would you think that?"

"Hmmm...I would like to tell you but this is a public place and I don't want to make a scene." Elenore retorted.

"I better make this quick before Margaret shows up." Carrossea thought.

"Well I have two words to say to you Miss Baker."

"And what would they be Mr. Doone?" Elenore replied with a crossed look on her face.

Carrossea smiled and said. "Sarks Sark"

With that Elenore froze in place with a shocked look on her face.

Carrossea got up with and touched Elenore on the shoulder as she began to fall. "Miss Baker?" He said in somewhat mock concern.

"Now Laetitia!" Poupee said and they joined hands and the eight year Elenore appeared. Poupee's brow furrowed as she appeared but he noticed a long chain attached to ankle by a shackle.

"What's wrong Poupee?" She asked worriedly. As Poupee pointed, she turned her head and gasped in surprise upon seeing the chain. "Where did that come from? I didn't see that before or that." She pointed to a doll in Elenore's hands.

"I don't know, we could ask her." Poupee replied just as puzzled.

Elenore looked around with a scared look on her face. "Where am I? What is this place? Where did everyone go?"

Laetitia walked up to Elenore with a warm smile and held her. "It's okay Elenore. You're safe here." Elenore nodded and calmed down. "Elenore can I ask where that chain leads to?" she asked.

"What chain? Elenore replied with a puzzled look as she tried to look for the chain Laetitia mentioned.

"She can't see it." Laetitia said sadly. As Poupee walked up to Laetitia, Elenore began to scream.

"NO! YOU STAY AWAY! I WON'T LET YOU TAKE HER AWAY FROM ME! EVER! EVER! EVER! I promised..." Elenore screamed as she held the doll tightly close to her.

"Promised who?" A shocked Laetitia asked as Poupee backed up a little shocked as well. Elenore sniffed.

"I promised mo... Grandpa... I would take care of her." She said as she looked at the doll lovingly.

"Ask her what her doll's name is. If it's what I think it is this may be the root of a much deeper problem." Poupee said concerned.

Laetitia nodded and asked Elenore. "What's your little one's name?"

Elenore smiled as she held the doll in front of Laetitia. "Margaret. Her name is Margaret." She brought the doll closer to her and began to rock it gently in her arms.

"You need to tell the real Margaret about this, she needs help before it's too late."

"It may be already too late, but I'll tell her. Please help keep the link up. I need to keep an eye on her." Laetitia said with tears running down her cheeks.

"Will you stay Poupee?" Laetitia asked a bit nervously.

Poupee smiled and replied warmly. "As long as Carrossea lives and I'm still inside I will stay by your side."

Laetitia hugged him tight. Tears flowing down her cheeks as he hugged her in return. All the while the younger version of Elenore sat there holding her doll oblivious to what was going on around her.

"Miss...?"

"Miss Baker...?"

Elenore found herself sitting in a chair. She turned her head to see a waiter and Carrossea with a look of genuine concern on his face. "How did I get here?" Elenore asked a little shocked.

"You fainted and this gentleman caught you before fell. Are you all right Miss?" A waiter replied.

"I'm fine now, thank you. I'm sorry if I caused any trouble." Elenore replied with her head bowed slightly. She looked at Carrossea. "Thank you Mr. Doone." She said a little embarrassed and a little confused. She noticed the look of honest concern on his face and tried to collect herself before Margaret showed up. Carrossea noticed she was wearing body armor underneath her uniform when he caught her. "*Why would she need to wear body armor, unless they're after Margaret too? I should lay off her for now. You've got some real problems lady...*" Carrossea thought to himself as he saw Margaret, Laetitia and... Madlax (!) walk up as Elenore rose from the chair.

When they finally got to the cafe Margaret noticed Elenore was already sitting at a table... with a man? Only when she got closer did she realize who he actually was. That sure came as a surprise! She hadn't seen him or heard from him since the events in Gazth-Sonika. He just left without saying anything after she returned him back to life. Not like she was expecting him to be thankful or even stay in touch. In fact she could understand perfectly well if he wouldn't want to see her, but this all made her a bit confused about where exactly did he stand in relation to her. But she decided not to think about all those complicated things for now and just let herself be happy at this meeting. She did kinda miss him after all.

"Carrossea? So you're here in Nafrece! You've been here all along? I worried a bit back then, when you left without saying a thing... But what a great coincidence! I just met Madlax and now I find you here! It's becoming quite an interesting day." Margaret said with honest, yet contained enthusiasm. "How have you been?"

Carrossea had to contain his enthusiasm, but he was happy that Margaret was happy to see him. "I just arrived in Nafrece a few days ago and to be honest I didn't know if you wanted to see me again. I do apologize if I made you worry". That got him a somewhat dirty look from Elenore, but he didn't press it considering what he knew. "It was quite fortunate I was nearby when Miss Baker fainted. I hope she's not working herself too hard." Elenore shot him another dirty glance but kept quiet, after all he did catch her, and she felt he deserved some gratitude even if it was dead silence.

"I see Madlax is here as well. What an interesting coincidence. May I ask what brings you to Nafrece?" He asked politely.

"What? Elenore did?" Margaret immediately switched her attention from Carrossea and approached Elenore with concern, leaving him to catch up with Madlax for a while. "Are you feeling sick Elenore? Should we head back home now? I don't mind that you know? I really don't. I couldn't have fun if you weren't well. You should tell me about these things." Margaret somewhat wanted to go deep into the topic, as both her and Laetitia had been noticing these recent changes about Elenore, though now wasn't the right place for it and she thought it would be better to confront her about it at home, in private.

"I'm fine Miss. The weather is bit warm and I didn't compensate for it. I'm sorry if I made you worry Miss. I'm quite all right now Miss." Elenore flashed a reassuring smile. "Thank you Miss Margaret for your concern." She removed her shawl and folded it. "There that should do it. I feel much better. Now we can spend as much time as you like Miss Margaret." Elenore said trying to reassure Margaret that everything was all right. Inside though part of her panicked. She didn't want to burden Margaret with her problems and she didn't want to tell her what was really bothering her. This fainting spell (though she suspected Carrossea may have had a part in it, but she couldn't tell for sure) didn't help matters one bit. She smiled reassuringly and said; "Please Miss Margaret sit, you must be hungry by now and this place serves some excellent pasta from what I've heard."

"Well, ok, if you say so Elenore." Margaret replied as they all got to their seats at the table. "But I get the feeling you don't tell me everything at times. I'd like you to trust me a bit more; I'm not a child anymore you know? If you have something that troubles you I'd like to help somehow, even if you think I might not be of much help. I guess I'm not as reliable as Vanessa at things like this... but I promise you I'll do my best!" she tried to sound reassuring.

"Oh, it just occurred to me!" Margaret said in a lighter tone, before Elenore could say anything else, "Maybe it just really surprised you to meet Carrossea here so unexpectedly?" She asked quite clueless. "I was a bit taken aback with Mr. Doone's unexpected appearance. Thank you for your concern Miss Margaret. But you're right Miss Margaret and I know you'll do your best and I do think a talk is in order. But I don't want it to spoil your day Miss Margaret; it can wait till we get home. Let's order some lunch Miss Margaret." Elenore replied grateful that Margaret didn't press any further. *"But I could've sworn he used those words on me. But it's best I don't mention it. I'll just keep a closer eye on Margaret."* She thought to herself. Elenore bowed her head. *"No, you're not a child anymore. Perhaps it's time you did know. But why is it scaring me? But you do deserve the truth; you gave me that consideration when you told me what had happened."* Elenore thought to herself.

Madlax bluntly replied "I'm looking for work; business is quiet in Gazth-Sonika". "Why did you come here then?" Carrossea asked rather smartly. "Don't you know most of the fighting these days is in South America? Why don't you join me there? I'll provide the brains." He asked rather invitingly. Madlax did find the offer enticing but unlike Margaret she couldn't trust a man who was once the right hand man of Friday Monday. Madlax privately knew she can be a bit clueless but she wasn't stupid and she had this feeling that he wanted her to be his "new Limelda". Suddenly she saw a flash of Vanessa in the jungle in her mind and felt the smell of tacos. "My pasta is ready, another time" as Madlax excused herself after noticing that aromatic smell.

"South America? Is that where you've been till now Carrossea?" Margaret's attention got driven back at him after she finished talking to Elenore and ordered some pasta. "What have you been doing all this time? You're not back to working with criminal organizations, are you?" she asked confused.

"Yes. Margaret I've been in South America." He briefly closed his eyes. "But I'm not working with those people, as far as I know they think I'm dead and I want it to stay that way. As for what I was doing there, I was looking for something." Elenore ignored him and continued eating, but keeping an eye on Carrossea.

He wanted to warn her about the Soldats, but he was afraid that they might involve her if he mentioned them. *"It may be too late..."* He thought to himself.

"I have some business to attend to Margaret, but it was a great pleasure seeing you again."

He briefly held her hand and started to walk off but not before saying.

"Take care Margaret and you as well Miss Baker."

"I bet your neck deep in trouble already Mr. Doone." Elenore thought to herself.

"I'm sorry Margaret, but I do have pressing business that needs my attention."

As soon as Margaret asked him to see her Carrossea smiled trying to hide his glee. "Of course for you Margaret anything. Goodbye Margaret and take care." With that he walked down the street.

Elenore sat eating in silence. She wanted to say something to Carrossea but other thoughts crossed her mind. But she was glad he was gone but with Margaret's invitation it would be most likely he'll show up again.

She knew Margaret liked him, but that man attracted trouble and she hoped that he wouldn't get Margaret involved like the last time. She continued to go over in her head what she would say to Margaret, it wasn't easy but she felt she needed to.

"You're leaving again Poupee?" Laetitia asked with a little sadness in her eyes. "No, only my other self is. Now that we've relinked with one another I will be here by your side." Poupee replied with a warm smile.

"Oh that's wonderful!" Laetitia joyously said with a wide smile on her face, but the smile faded when she turned her head towards Elenore rocking the doll. "What about her? Do you mind that she's here?" Poupee looked at Elenore and then back at Laetitia. "I don't mind, but you really have to tell Margaret about this."

Laetitia nodded and they both sat on the bench and she held Poupee's hand smiling.

Elenore stood there rocking the doll. "I will take care of you because you are my family. You are all I have left in this world..."

Chloe watched the scene at the cafe with interest. There was Carrossea Doone just standing there and she couldn't do anything without revealing her presence. She saw him look towards her direction. Did he see her? She doubted it. She did see him catch the maid and then talk to the blond haired woman. She would have to ask Lady Altena for information about this woman, maybe she would get the chance to kill her. She watched him walk off and she went back to her duty; watching Margaret Burton and the maid. She understood the need to study a target, but this was getting boring, no those two were boring...

After finishing eating lunch the four of them started walking back home. Margaret was looking forward to welcome Madlax at her place and let her settle comfortably, she wondered what it was like to live in the same place with her.

"So Madlax, I heard you mentioning you were looking for a job before. What kind of job are you looking for in Nafrece? I don't think you'd be able to work as an agent here, and I would prefer if you didn't do that." Margaret said in a sad tone, "You could always take some vacation while you're staying with us!" she suggested more enthusiastically, "If we manage to contact Vanessa she might even help you find a job later! What do you say?"

"I am looking to be an agent; assassination, protection, infiltration, spying. I'm not picky though it's a sign of the times. I guess I can try something else Margaret but I doubt I'll be good at it and I won't be used to it. But I am glad to join you on vacation" Madlax told Margaret in a relaxed tone. Although she had been out of work and indeed real practice, this seemed like a real vacation to her. *"I can barely remember having a real vacation in my whole life, why not? It's a free offer. Besides I might meet Vanessa again."* Madlax thought.

Elenore noticed the happy look on Margaret's face when Madlax accepted her offer but she wondered how long that would last.

When they got home, she made tea and prepared the guest bedroom for Madlax. When she was finished she took a deep breath. "Well I did say that we needed to talk, but why am I so scared? I can't turn back now, I just hope..." She walked out to the living room and approached Margaret. "Miss Margart, may I please have a word with you in private?" Margaret nodded ascent and followed her to her another part of the house.

Madlax sipped her tea and watched Elenore and Margaret leave the room. When the pair were out of earshot she turned to Laetitia. "Laetitia what's going on?"

Laetitia looked at Madlax sadly and replied in the same tone. "It's Elenore."

"What about Elenore?" Madlax asked prodding Laetitia to continue.

"Ever since we got home from Gazth-Sonika she's hasn't been herself." Laetitia continued.

"She was dead and then brought back to life. That kind of thing can change you. Did Margaret ask her what was going on?" Madlax enquired.

"Margaret has tried on and off but she keeps running into Elenore's great wall of denial." Laetitia answered though the last part did make Madlax giggle.

"I'm sorry, that last part sounded like a joke."

Laetitia tilted her head and thought and then smiled briefly. "Oh I guess I did make a joke, though I didn't mean to."

"After what happened at the café I guess Margaret and Elenore are going have that talk." Madlax said looking in the direction Margaret and Elenore went.

When they got to another room Elenore waited till Margaret sat down. "Elenore please tell me what is happening to you. You've been acting weird since we got back from Gazth-Sonika and I'm worried about you." Margaret asked with a great deal of concern.

Elenore bowed her head. "You deserve the truth Miss Margaret; after all you gave me that consideration. But there's more than one thing here. I would to apologize for keeping this from you but I didn't want to add to your guilt over my death but I will give you the full details." For the next few minutes Elenore described in full detail her encounter with the soldiers, her fall from the cliff and the march through the jungle to reach the field of flowers.

Margaret looked at Elenore dejectedly. It was bad enough because of her actions Elenore had died. But knowing what she went through and the cause of it made her feel worse. She want to give Elenore a comforting hug but it looked like Elenore had more to say.

"As a result Miss Margaret, I've been having flashbacks and severe doubts on how well of a protector I am to you. I couldn't pull the trigger, not at that soldier nor that man who captured you. But what I'm about to say scares me, I don't know how you'll react to this but I feel you must know this as well. Remember when I asked if you knew what I meant by "you are my family." This is what I meant..."

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes tears beginning to well.

"Miss Margaret...I'm gay and I love you..."

For the next few seconds upon hearing Elenore's confession Margaret didn't really know what to say. This really took her off guard. She just stood there looking at her for a while, trying to make sense of those words. She couldn't stand seeing Elenore crying, and she felt guilty for that too, but she had no clue what to do or say to fix things. Right now, she didn't even know if anything she might say or do would do any good or just make things worse. She decided not to move for a while. Margaret lowered her head and finally broke the silence, "How... long has this been going on, Elenore? Was it since we came back from Gazth-Sonika, or even before that? I feel so dumb now, for not realizing it..." She replied without looking up, obviously trying to hide her embarrassment.

Elenore stood there her heart pounding in her chest. Margaret's reaction confirmed Elenore's fear of a worst case scenario.

"And also...why, Elenore? Why me?" she asked, raising her head and looking Elenore in the eye now, "It doesn't bother me one bit if you prefer girls to boys, but why me of all people? I'm so unsuited for you. I mean, I'm immature, clumsy, absentminded and not very clever, I'm afraid! ... I don't think I could ever actually help you with anything and I only cause you trouble!" At this point Margaret was feeling terrified and could barely keep her tears, this was a lot more than what she could handle and she feared she wasn't quite reacting to it the best way possible, but all she could say was what came to mind.

"It doesn't matter, I still love you flaws and all." That was what Elenore wanted to say. Before she should Margaret continued. "Doesn't it... feel awkward to you? Because we've grown up together in the same house, I always thought of you as a sister. And I thought you felt the same way and that's what you meant by family. And... and... I know this isn't important, but you work for me! This isn't right is it? Even if I felt the same about you, it wouldn't be right would it?"

Margaret asked confused as she got up to try and comfort her somehow. "I'm so sorry Elenore!" she said at last, with teary eyes, yet not daring to approach and hug her just yet. She felt her heart beating rapidly, no not beating but pounding in her chest. She took another deep breath.

"I'm so sorry..." Those words used to bring her some comfort after she came back to life, but now they felt like knives plunging into her soul.

She tried her hardest to keep herself together after seeing Margaret begin to cry. She bowed her head in shame. "You're correct Miss Margaret, I do work for you and I've clearly overstepped my bounds by my statement. I will accept any disciplinary action you wish to take. To answer the Miss' questions; my feelings for you grew out from caring for you and that was before we went to Gazth-Sonika. I apologize for upsetting you and by doing so I've made yet another terrible mistake. If you wish, I will never bring up the subject again."

"My God, that was so cold." She felt disgust at herself. "But what could I do or say, she's right I do work for her and all I've done is made things worse. Grandfather must be turning over in his grave. I'm sorry Grandfather; it seems that even I broke your trust. Question is; what happens now?" Elenore thought standing in front of Margaret with her head deeply bowed.

"What are you saying Elenore?" Margaret was now even more confused at Elenore's excessively professional reply, "Do you really think I could ever punish you for whatever reason? How can you think that? And how could I ever... and after you finally go through the trouble of being honest to me about this! I really appreciate you telling me the truth, so please don't talk like that! It's... not your fault..." she struggled with her own words, noticing how nothing of what she said seemed to change Elenore's attitude, "It's my fault too, I guess... I never meant for you to fall in love with me. I'm sorry. I wish I knew how to deal with this better..." Margaret said in a low sad tone, turning her head away in shame and guilt.

"I need to step out for a while. I'm going alone, but please don't worry. I'll be back soon." Was all Margaret could say before turning away from Elenore and leaving the house in a hurry, leaving Madlax and Laetitia with a slightly perplexed look? Elenore winced as she heard the door shut. She walked to the main bathroom and closed the door and turned on the cold water faucet in the sink. When she thought the sound of the water as loud enough, she sat on the floor buried her face in her apron and began to cry.

After a few minutes of crying; got up and wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She looked at herself in the mirror. Elenore could've sworn the image reflected grew darker... "Well, are you happy now? That was pretty cold of you, but then again showing warmth was never your strong point was it?." The image asked.

"No I'm not." Elenore replied tearfully to the reflection

"Then why the attitude? Poor Margaret was only trying understand why you have those feelings for her and what did you do. You turned into the Ice Bitch and made poor confused Margaret run away."

"You think I wanted to, but she put me in a corner by saying I worked for her. I know that and I knew we couldn't have that close of a relationship because of that, but it didn't matter to me." Elenore said back with tears streaming down her face.

"Then you're lucky she's not around anymore..." The reflection interjected and then added.

"Again why the cold?" The reflection asked coldly.

"What was I supposed to do? I didn't enjoy saying that to her and I'm disgusted with myself for doing so. But part of me is hurt, that part of me that loves her and feels rejected."

"So that part hid behind the Ice Bitch and you let her have it with both barrels. Congratulations, I'm sure she'll stay distant to you now. "The reflection coldly mocked.

Elenore was going to answer when she heard knocking on the door, she wiped her face and eyes, straightened herself, turned off the faucet and opened the door.

Madlax had watched Margaret hurry past her and Laetitia. Then she heard the door to the main bathroom shut. She wondered what had happened and head to the bathroom. Rather perplexed, Madlax walked to the bathroom only to find the door shut and some rather sad crying. "Elenore is that you?" Madlax asked but it was clear she was wallowing, too deep in sorrow to listen.

Elenore opened the door to find Madlax standing outside.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I needed to freshen up. Was there something you needed Madlax?" Elenore asked, her eyes showing that she obviously was crying.

"Is everything alright Elenore? I just saw Margaret rush pass me." Madlax asked with some concern.

"I'm sorry; I'm not at liberty to say at this point at time. Is there anything you need?" Elenore professionally replied.

Third Moon Rising

"And the Ice Bitch strikes again... A voice echoed in Elenore's head.

"I was planning on taking a bath and relaxing before dinner." Madlax replied, a little taken back by Elenore's coldness.

"What's going on with you, this isn't really like you? Is it...? This is where I really wish Vanessa was here, she know how to deal with this." Madlax thought to herself.

"I'll draw your bath and start on cooking dinner." Elenore said.

After she drew Madlax's bath, she checked on a somewhat confused Laetitia.

"Where did Margaret go?" Laetitia asked.

"Miss Margaret needed to go out and she will return in due time. Please don't worry Laetitia. I will prepare dinner soon." Elenore replied with a fake smile. Laetitia could see the spiritual ice form around Elenore in to the shape of a maid's uniform acting as armor. Protecting something she could not see.

"Margaret, what did you do? You were supposed to free her, but the chains are growing tighter." Laetitia thought to herself as Elenore went to the kitchen to cook dinner.

Chapter 2 A flux in time

Mexico 3:00 A.M. (8:00 A.M. Nafrece)

“You have failed to capture her yet again, Jodie.”

Jodie sighed quietly. Those weird triceratops/ninja hybrids found her about an hour ago, knocked her out and brought her to a closed bar. When she came to, she found herself hanging upside down, just above a billiards table while a ninja held a cell phone to her ear. Her coven’s chairperson was scolding her for again failing to get Ellis. It was becoming quite routine actually.

It had been a while since the events at Wiñay Marka, and Jodie decided to leave the Coven and work at Amigo Tacos. But they contacted her about a month ago, informing her about some ancient and powerful artifacts, and Ellis’s possible role with them. Because of what happened, Jodie, Ellis and Nadie had become good friends. She worried for the girl’s safety, and so was forced to come back. Of course, her assignment was to follow Ellis and retrieve her, but she had no intention of doing the latter.

“I hope for your sake you will follow through next time.”

The ninja hung up the phone, signaled for the others to let her down, and left her lying on the table. She dusted herself off quickly, walked out the door and immediately went back to staking the two girls out once again. Neither Jodie nor the ninjas noticed the tall young woman watching nearby (unless either she or they could sense the Gift or temporal fluxes they weren’t going to see her at all.)

“It looks like things have begun to move here. I’ll have to wait till tomorrow for the show to really begin.” The young woman said to no one in particular and giggled slightly at the last part of her statement. She looked at a watch on her wrist and smiled as Jodie got into her car which the ninjas had taken to bring her here and drove off. “We’ll get a chance to speak soon Jodie Hayward. But now I have a show to catch in Nafrece. Ta ta.” The woman pulled out a small device, looked at it and then pressed a couple buttons and then she was gone.

Nafrece 7:15 A.M

Kirika and Mireille emerged from the alleyway as they hurried along trying not to draw attention to themselves. They quickly walked a couple blocks as they heard sirens in the distance. When they thought they had gotten far enough they slowed down. Mireille wasn’t in a good mood and it showed on face. Kirika noticed the look on her face. She was going to ask what the matter was when she noticed a tiny outdoor café. “Mireille let’s rest a bit.” Kirika said gesturing to the café. Mireille was going disagree but the grumbling in stomach and the fact they weren’t being followed changed her mind. “All right, I could use a bite to eat.” Mireille responded and the pair went to the café.

When they got there the only other people were a bored waitress and a tall young woman chatting away to herself till they noticed the Whiteberry in her ear. They sat down at a table that wasn’t noticeable from the street. The waitress took their order with a tired smile and trotted off.

The waitress soon returned with their tea and scones. When she had left Kirika asked. “What’s wrong?” Mireille gave a slight sigh and then she answered. “I’m just a little frustrated. I can’t figure out why the Soldats are after us again after all these years. Something has changed but I don’t know what.”

“Well maybe it has something to do with the last person you pissed off!” The woman said loudly as Mireille turned to the woman who was engrossed with her conversation. Mireille was about say

something but a thought crossed her mind. *"Who did we piss off in the Soldats? Breffort? Breffort said they'd leave them alone. He was either dead or switched sides by now"*. She thought to herself. She couldn't really blame him. She and Kirika were mad dogs on the run, tearing the entire Soldats system apart. Killers who refused to kill. It was so ridiculous, she couldn't laugh.

"I have a hunch on whom, but following that lead will have to wait." Mireille said turning her attention back to Kirika.

"What do we do?" Kirika asked.

"We lay low till tomorrow and leave by train." Mireille responded.

"Yeah, I wouldn't expect leaving the city anytime soon so you two will have to handle it by yourselves."

This time Kirika turned her head towards the woman on the phone. She wondered if the woman was listening in on their conversation and or be a Soldat. She calmly got up and walked over to the table where the woman was seated. Kirika noticed the woman's green eyes and short brown hair.

"Excuse me." Kirika said putting her hand in her jacket pocket and grabbing the gun within.

"Find out who decided to torch our warehouse!" The woman said apparently ignoring Kirika.

"Excuse me." Kirika said again this putting her finger on the trigger.

"I don't care! It's Roanapur! Bribe someone or suck their dick, I don't care! Just find out who did it!" The woman said loudly. Then she pressed a button to end the call.

"Excuse me." Kirika said in louder tone ready to pull the trigger when she felt Mireille hand on her shoulder.

The woman looked at Kirika and Mireille with a frustrated look. "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Could you please keep it down some of us are trying to have a quiet breakfast here." Mireille replied a tad annoyed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's just we've had some unexpected trouble in Roanapur lately and getting on our nerves. I'm sorry to disturb your breakfast. Elsa Rene, Pegasus Imports. Here's my card." The woman said pulling out a business card. Mireille looked it over and handed it back.

"I'm we're not interested but thank you." Mireille replied.

The woman shrugged and picked up the business card. "Again I apologize." The woman said and Mireille silently nodded with a satisfied look. Mireille and Kirika went back to their table as the woman called for the waitress.

"That woman could be a Soldat." Kirika said quietly to Mireille.

"No, she's just a frustrated business woman. Nafrecean companies with holdings in Gazth-Sonika have been attacked recently. But anyone with holdings in Roanapur is just asking for it anyway." Mireille replied as she watched the woman leave and get on a nearby Vespa scooter and ride off.

"Roanapur?" Kirika asked.

"It's a total shit hole in Gazth-Sonika. Rumor has it not even Infant or the Soldats wouldn't touch the place."

Elsa rode off farther away from the pair and when she was far enough she turned down a alleyway. She pressed a button on the scooter and a nearby garage door opened. She went into the garage and parked the scooter and closed the door.

"Hmm...for a few seconds there I really thought Kirika was going to shoot me." Elsa said as she pulled out a device but not before she noticed a sticky note.

Mom needs milk.

You know what kind

3 bottles

10162033

E☺

Elsa smiled as she read the note. She had a habit of leaving sticky notes when she travelled. She wondered if she in her travels actually helped invent sticky notes. She pressed a few buttons and she was gone.

Syracuse Sicily 215 B.C.

"Eureka!" Archimedes shouted as he ran naked from his bath passing an unseen Elsa along the way.

"Oops, Wrong time period." She said with a little chuckle and she pressed a couple more buttons and she disappeared.

Nafrece July 7th 2011 (4:30 A.M.)

The phone ringing woke up Douglas Rosenberg from a sound sleep. He looked at the caller ID and pressed speaker.

"Hello Sir." Douglas said trying not to sound like he was still asleep.

"Did you receive the package I sent Douglas?" Friday's voice echoed from the speaker.

"Yes sir, but I highly doubt she's in this country Sir." Douglas replied.

"She'll be there soon. How is the current operation going?"

"We haven't found the goods yet, but we know that the Soldats don't have them either."

"As long you keep the Soldats distracted from our real goal, finding the artifacts is trivial. Oh you might not know this but Altena has sent her errand girl out to your area. I'm curious what she is up to. "

"Yes Sir. I'll get on that immediately. Anything else Sir?"

"Next time don't use Speaker phone." Friday hung up and a dial tone came over the speakers.

"What are you up to Friday? And why her of all people?" Douglas asked himself as he sat in bed.

Unseen Elsa had listened to the entire conversation. She wondered if Friday knew she was there.

"If you only knew Dougie. You'll would wished you've stayed dead." Elsa said knowing that he couldn't hear her.

"Better go get the milk before mom starts worrying...again." Elsa said sighing and she pushed a couple buttons and she was gone.

Chapter 3. Maiden on a pale horse

Chloe followed them home and got into a position where she could hear their conversations. At first the conversations were quite mundane and very boring until Elenore asked Margaret to have a private chat. Chloe smiled as she overheard Elenore's admission to Margaret, then Margaret's bumbled reply and a hurt Elenore's response. She actually felt bad for Elenore. Here was someone who went through hell and died on top of it pouring her soul out to the one she loved. And what did that little twit do, she didn't say "I love you", no she said "you work for me".

She might as well stabbed her in the heart with that response and then overreact when she forced her into a corner by saying that. Chloe fingered one of her knives, wanting to put one into Margaret but Lady Altena orders were no contact, just observe for the moment. She was annoyed with this spying nonsense. She knew her place; she was a killer and she did it well. She sighed and resigned herself to continue watching. Besides this may be a test or part of a training exercise she reasoned to herself. She watched as Margaret ran out the door and into the night. She wondered which one to watch now; Margaret or Elenore? She decided to stay put and watch Madlax. There were no orders regarding her so she grinned evilly as she planned.

Margaret didn't even realize how dark it was outside already till she had walked far enough away from home. She realized it might have been a big mistake to run off by herself like that, without even saying where she was going. But she couldn't have said that anyway, she didn't know where she was going herself. She needed to be alone for a while. She needed time to think what to say to Elenore when she got back home. She had messed things up, this she was sure about. She just wasn't quite sure what exactly upset Elenore the most. She could just apologize for the whole thing altogether, but would that really solve everything? What would she apologize for? For not loving her back? That wasn't the case, for she loved Elenore very much, just not the way Elenore would have wanted it. Maybe she should have just kept silent and not have said anything at all. But Elenore would probably want a reply from her after being confronted with the truth.

"What should I do?" Margaret thought to herself, "I don't want Elenore to stay angry at me. I just want things to be like they were before. How can I make things better? I don't like this. I wanna go home. Where am I?" She suddenly realized she had walked further away than she planned. She figured she would be able to find her way back somehow, but she honestly didn't know where she was right now. "I'm such an idiot... I even managed to get myself lost..." she said to herself in a low tone, not realizing the person approaching her.

"Margaret, is that you? What are you doing here all by yourself at a time like this?" Margaret turned back suddenly, upon hearing the familiar voice calling out to her "Vanessa?"

"It is you Margaret! Why are you out here alone? Where's Elenore?"

Margaret hugged Vanessa crying and Vanessa hugged her back. "Alright Margaret, start at the beginning and tell me why are you out here alone and without Elenore?" Vanessa said warmly. What Margaret couldn't see was the Torc around Vanessa's neck sending out waves of calm and peace. "Vanessa, I think I did something awful." Margaret started explaining between sobs. "Me and Laetitia had been noticing Elenore has been acting weird ever since we got back from Gazth-Sonika. So this afternoon I decided to confront her about it and she explained me everything. But she also told me something I wasn't expecting. She told me that she loved me! And it's not like she loves me like a sister but, you know... and I must have said something wrong that really hurt her feelings because now she's acting weird to me.

And I don't know what to do or say, I'm afraid she'll hate me. I just want things to go back to normal. What should I do Vanessa?"

"Well for starters, let's go to my car and I'll drive you home. While we're doing that just tell me everything you can remember saying to her and what she said to you." Margaret nodded and as they walked she told Vanessa what she said. As soon she said "you work for me!" Vanessa sighed and patted Margaret on the back. "Okay I think I know what happened here."

"First off, Elenore would never hate you, especially not after a declaration like that. When we get to your home, you'll give Elenore the night off and you'll tell her that you insist and that she comes with me. Part of the problem I think is that she hides behind her uniform and her professionalism. I know she would really like to tell you her feelings but as you said she works for you and that makes it difficult for her to do so. When you said "you work for me" you backed her into corner she couldn't get out of, so she hid behind her uniform so to speak." Margaret smiled wiping her tears as they drove back to her home. "Okay, what else do I do?" "I want you to remain calm and tell her and I'll handle the rest." Vanessa replied. "But what about Madlax she's there as well?" Margaret asked not so sure what to do. Vanessa smiled. "First I'll deal with Elenore and then Madlax, just keep her busy for me will you?" Vanessa said with a wink.

"Okay, I'll do that." Margaret replied, trying to focus on what Vanessa said, "Thank you Vanessa! I wouldn't know what to do now if it wasn't for you..." She admitted embarrassed.

"Now, now, don't worry about it. I'm actually glad I found you at the right place at the right time. I'm sorry I have been away this long without contacting you, but you know I'm always here for you."

When they arrived at the door, Margaret was a bit worried about how Elenore would receive her. But she figured Vanessa's presence would sooth things out somehow. So when she got to the door the first thing Margaret did was hug Elenore tight and apologize. "I'm sorry Elenore. I'm sorry I run off on my own like that. I should have stayed and talked things over with you. I was an idiot. Please forgive me." Elenore was taken by surprise by all this, but before she could reply anything, Vanessa walked in and Margaret continued "Oh also, I really insist you take the night off. Vanessa needs to talk to you, so she thought you could go have dinner out with her. I can take care of things here, so you don't have to worry, we'll be fine! Okay?" she said with a hopeful smile, anxiously waiting for her reply.

"I take it I have no choice in the matter do I?" Elenore asked looking into Margaret's eyes.

"Nope." Margaret replied with a smile and shake of her head.

"Okay I'll go" Elenore said with a warm smile, something inside pushed passed the Ice Bitch and to the real Elenore. As she started to walk to the door Vanessa grabbed her by the arm. "First things first, you're officially off the clock so let get you dressed in some more casual and no, you don't have a choice." And the pair walked straight to Elenore's room.

Once inside Elenore's room Vanessa said pointing a finger at her. "Starting changing young Lady."

"To what? I don't have many "casual clothes" to begin with." Elenore asked with some protest and a bit shocked at Vanessa's pushiness.

Vanessa sighed and opened Elenore's closet, only to find one teal color casual dress out the many maid's uniforms and her school uniform.

"Definitely going to have Margaret take her or tell her to get some outfits for herself." Vanessa sympathetically thought as she looked in the closet and she pulled out the dress and place it on the bed. Elenore had taken off her uniform and was about to reach for the dress when Vanessa stopped her.

"Take that off as well, we're going to eat, not to a warzone." Vanessa said slightly taken back when she saw the body armor Elenore was wearing. Elenore took off the armor and put on the dress and put on a pair of black low heeled shoes. She stared at herself in the mirror and for a brief moment wondered who

the woman in the mirror was. Then Vanessa held a tube of lipstick out. Elenore gently grabbed the tube and put some on without protest (knowing that it would be futile anyway).

"I can't remember why or when I bought this dress." Elenore somewhat said to herself. Vanessa looked over the dress on Elenore. The dress beautifully accentuated Elenore's figure and showed just enough cleavage to be daring. Vanessa noticed the look on Elenore's face and gave a reassuring hug and said with a warm smile. "Smile, you look beautiful in that dress." Elenore thought for a few seconds while looking herself over then she tilted her head slightly and smiled as to agree with Vanessa. Vanessa beamed. "See I told you, you look great! You should do this more often. Now let's go eat I'm starving."

Elenore quietly chuckled to herself as they both left the room.

When they got to the living room they found Margaret sitting quietly on the couch and Laetitia sitting in an overstuffed chair reading a children's book with the doll she got earlier today. Margaret got up from the couch when they came into the room.

"Wow Elenore, you look great!" Margaret said amazed. She had never seen Elenore dressed in anything but her maid's uniform. Of course there was that one time she was dressed in her school uniform and when they were children she had seen her in a ballet costume (at least she thought she did but she wasn't too sure about that. She made a mental note to ask later.) But all in all this was a welcome change and she saw a genuine smile on Elenore.

"Thank you Miss Margaret." Elenore replied silently relieved that Margaret's mood had changed for the better.

"We better get going. I'll have her home before midnight." Vanessa jokingly said.

"In case you get hungry Miss Margaret. I prepared your favorite dish. It's in the kitchen; do you want me to serve you before I go?" Elenore said humbly and in an apologetic tone.

Margaret smiled and warmly said. "Thank you Elenore but I can serve myself and the others. This is your night off. Go out and have some fun. I insist." Margaret playfully put her foot down to show that she was serious but not in a way that it seemed a command. She hoped that Vanessa could help Elenore.

"All right Miss Margaret if you insist." Elenore replied.

"I insist." Margaret said firmly but warmly.

Behind her book Laetitia smiled and she put the book down long enough to wish Elenore a good time tonight. Elenore smiled and thanked Laetitia. Vanessa gently guided Elenore out the door before Madlax got out of the main bathroom.

Elenore and Vanessa got into her car and drove off. There was an awkward silence in the car for a few blocks and then Vanessa spoke.

"Talk about déjà vu." Vanessa said with a grin.

Elenore was deep in thought when she was distracted by Vanessa words. "Yes, it seems like it." She said somewhat quietly.

Vanessa's tone became serious but compassionate. "Elenore, you've haven't been the same since we got back from Gazth-Sonika and that's got everyone concerned. I asked Margaret to give you the night off for a reason; to give you a chance to talk freely without being bound by your job. I'm your friend and I'm worried about you. Can you at least tell me please?"

Elenore stared out the window and then looked at Vanessa. "All right, but you have to tell me where you've been? Miss Margaret and I have been worried about you too."

"It's a deal, so what's on your mind?" Vanessa said with a caring smile.

Elenore spoke in detail her encounter with the soldiers and her fall from the cliff. She didn't notice that Vanessa had pulled over and stopped the engine. Elenore then described her trek through the jungle to reach the flower field where she died. She stopped and sadly stared at the dashboard.

"There's more isn't there?" Vanessa asked compassionately.

Elenore nodded and Vanessa gently urged her on and then Elenore continued.

"Ever since we got back I've been having doubts on how well I can protect Miss Margaret. But not the worst of it; I've been having these nightmares."

"What kind of nightmares?" Vanessa asked with growing concern.

"Some nights I dream I'm running through the jungle and off a cliff. Others I see that man who captured Miss Margaret and Mr. Doone mocking me. And..." Elenore began to cry "And...some nights I see myself in a coffin or lying on a slab in a morgue. When I wake up from those dreams I wonder if I'm really alive..."

Vanessa reached over and hugged Elenore tightly. Elenore cried on her shoulder as she did so. She cried for a few minutes and then she let go of Vanessa. Vanessa handed her a couple of tissues. Elenore gave quick thanks and then wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

Vanessa gave Elenore time to compose herself before speaking. With an understanding look and sympathetic tone Vanessa spoke.

"As for the dreams; I've had some those too and woken up wondering if I was alive. As for the rest it sounds like you have a classic case of Post Traumatic Syndrome. You really need to see someone about it. You just can't leave that untreated; it can lead to other illnesses. I'll give you the address and phone number of a women's clinic I went to after I got back, they're very helpful there. Just promise me you'll make an appointment there tomorrow, I don't want to have use Margaret as a club to make you do it. But it's is for your own good, and you shouldn't suffer in silence."

Elenore closed her eyes and thought for a moment and then spoke. "I know you're doing this because you care and I'm sorry I've dragged you into my mess. But if I tell a doctor that I died and came back to life they'll think I was delusional."

"I know you don't like to lie but you might have to bend the truth and say you had a near death experience which led to you having these nightmares." Vanessa replied.

Elenore paused again and then replied. "Well I have the scars to prove it and your explanation seems more plausible. I'll make the appointment tomorrow. Again I'm sorry to drag you into my mess when you have your own issues to deal with."

There's no need to apologize, that's what friends are for. And besides I always look out for my friends." Vanessa said warmly smiling and her stomach growled loudly and Elenore smirked.

"Now let's go eat, I'm really starving here." Vanessa said in a mock pout rubbing her stomach.

"Now, why doesn't that surprise me? But it just so happens I'm hungry as well" Elenore said with a grin on her face.

Vanessa started up the car and they drove off. After a short while Vanessa parked and the pair went into the nearest restaurant.

Elenore noticed the pink triangle when they went in. When they were seated and placed their order Elenore looked at Vanessa and then partly at the table. "You know... don't you..." Elenore said with a little anxiety in her voice.

"She did in her own way. No offence Elenore but I kind of figured that you were when I first met you."

Elenore looked at Vanessa in shock. "Really!? Was I that obvious!?"

"Yes and few years later I saw the bookmarks to a few lesbian sites on your computer and I really doubt that they're Margaret's. Plus your "collection" was a dead giveaway."

Elenore blushed. "Wait a minute, what were you doing on my computer?!"

"Well I needed to use a computer and Margaret was busy on hers so she told me to use yours."
Elenore sighed.

Vanessa noticed and said. "Actually I'm not surprised you would develop feelings of that nature towards her considering you two grew up together. Oh here's our food, we'll talk some more after dinner.
Elenore agreed and they ate.

After dinner Vanessa paid the bill. She led Elenore to the dance floor. Slow dance music was playing while other couples were dancing around them.

"I thought we were going to talk?" Elenore asked a bit confused.

"We will but I thought you could use a little fun and a break." Vanessa replied.

Elenore nodded consent knowing what they had to talk about was best left to them alone. Vanessa held Elenore and they began to dance. While they danced Vanessa held Elenore close to her. She could feel that something else was troubling her friend...something deep. They danced through a couple more songs till Vanessa saw out the corner of her eye a pale white horse. She silently sighed and then she looked at Elenore who looked like she was at peace. "Do you want to get going? I still owe you an explanation and we and finish our talk." Vanessa asked partly wishing she could have a couple more dances with her.

"I don't want to stay out too late and I do want to hear your explanation." Elenore concurred.

Vanessa went and ordered a carafe of tea. A couple minutes later they got the carafe and left.

Vanessa silently breathed a sigh of relief as they drove off; for unbeknownst to Elenore a couple minutes later a carload of agents pulled up to the curb, got out and went into the restaurant.

They drove for awhile till Vanessa found a parking place overlooking the city.

The distant city lights contrasted with the moonless night and the stars could be seen. Elenore looked in awe at the beauty of the contrast.

Vanessa made two cups of tea and handed one to Elenore who was looking at the distant city lights and then the stars.

"Pretty out, I've never seen the city like this before."

"It's a very nice view from here, but I didn't bring you here just for the view, nice as it is."

"Right. From what I gathered Miss Margaret told you she had a hard time dealing with what I said. I understood that there couldn't be any serious relationship. She sees me more as sister than anything and the fact I do work for her. "Tears welled in Elenore's eyes."Vanessa, I feel horrible for saying what I said to her, but she painted me into a corner and a part of me was hurt. I could accept she couldn't love me the way I wished, but I did wish she would've said "I love you" somewhere in the conversation so I..."

"So you hid behind your uniform and put up a professional front, instead of telling her what you wanted to say. Am I right?"

Elenore nodded while Vanessa gave her a hug. "If you want I can talk to Margaret about this and see what we can work out, Okay."

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

"Oh one other thing, you need to get out the house more often. And by that I mean go out and make some more friends and have a good time. Taking care of Margaret and Laetitia is great but you need to take care of "you" as well. Life is too short, as we both well know..."

"I get what you mean and I'll make an effort."Elenore grinned "It at least it will get you off my back."

Vanessa looked at Elenore in mock shock. "Elenore you make me sound like a nag!"She smiled and said "Shall we head back now."

Elenore grabbed her by the arm. "Oh no, you still owe me an explanation and I want to hear it."

Vanessa sighed. "You're right, we made a deal and now it's my turn." She unbuttoned the top buttons on her blouse to reveal a golden Torc with a horse head on each end around her neck.

"What is that?" Elenore asked with concern.

"This is the Torc of Rhiannon. Are you familiar with the legend of Rhiannon?"

"Not off hand, I think I've heard of her in school."

"I'm not surprised so I'll give you the short version. Long ago in the kingdom of Dyfed, Queen Rhiannon gave birth to a son; however, on the night of the birth, the child disappeared while in the care of six of Rhiannon's ladies-in-waiting. They feared that they would be put to death, and to avoid any blame, smeared blood from a puppy on the sleeping Rhiannon, and lay its bones around her bed. Pwyll the King imposed a penance on Rhiannon for her crime, to remain in the court of Arberth for seven years, and to sit every day near a horse-block outside the gate telling her story to all that passed. In addition, she was to carry any willing guest to the court on her back. Well to make a long story short she proved her innocence and in remembrance of her ordeal she crafted the Torc and imbued with the power to help ease suffering."

Elenore looked a little puzzled. "Well that's nice story but what does that have to do with you being gone for so long?"

"Try taking the Torc off from my neck. You'll see why."

Elenore tried to take the Torc off from Vanessa's neck but it wouldn't budge and Elenore was worried that she would injure Vanessa so she stopped.

"That's on tight Vanessa. I was worried I would hurt you." Elenore said with concern and some confusion wondering if this object was the beginning of more troubles for them.

"Yes it is..." Vanessa started to say then she looked down the road and saw the pale white horse coming toward them.

"Elenore get in the car now! I'll explain on the way." Both of them got in and sped off. A little further down the road they noticed the headlights of another car behind them. Vanessa rolled down her window, pulled out a gun and with a trick reminiscent of Madlax shot the front tire of the car behind them.

As the car following them spun, slowed and then hit the railing. As they drove away Vanessa smiled with some satisfaction. "Wow, that trick actually worked!"

"Who were those people following us Vanessa?" Elenore asked with great concern.

"It must be one of the three groups after the Torc." Vanessa replied.

"Well who are these groups?"

"One of them is only known by 'The Coven' I don't know much about them or the reason why other than they want the Torc. The other group is known as Les Soldats and they too want the Torc for their war against another group you should know as well."

"Who?" Elenore asked with some apprehension as she could probably guess.

"Enfant... They're after the Torc to use it against Les Soldats."

Elenore's face saddened. "Now I know why you stayed away. You didn't want us to get involved. But why come back here?"

"Honestly I thought I gave all of them the slip in Peru, but I guess I was mistaken. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I figured they would show up sooner or later. Carrosea Doone made his presence known, saying that he wasn't working for them. I knew that bastard was lying." Elenore said a little angrily.

"Actually, he's telling the truth. He's not working for Enfant; in fact he's the one who helped me get out of Peru."

"Please tell me your joking Vanessa." Elenore said with a little surprise.

"It's no joke. I've said what I can say here and I'll explain later but right now let's get you home. I think we've lost them for now."

Elenore nodded with a worried look on her face as they drove home.

Vanessa and Elenore made it back without further incident. They went up to the front door and before they went in they stopped.

"Before we go in I would to say thank you Vanessa. I really needed that and I hope we can do this again in the future..."

"You're quite welcome Elenore and I'm sorry that you had to see that. I didn't want to get any of you involved. But I fear it may be already too late."

"It's okay; I figured sooner or later those criminals were going to target Miss Margaret for revenge or something." Elenore said sullenly.

"So that's why the body armor, well with Madlax here, she could help you protect Margaret so you don't have to worry about pulling the trigger." Vanessa said putting a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"We better get in before they start worrying." Elenore said as she pulled out the key.

Back at the Burton estate, Madlax, Margaret and Laetitia were finishing dinner, without much being said between the three. Margaret wanted to speak out and clarify things for them. Especially Madlax, since she was their guest and this whole situation must have made her feel rather uncomfortable, not to mention confused about this sudden change of mood. But she didn't really know where to begin.

"Hmm, I guess I own you two an apology as well... for leaving like that... without saying anything..."

Margaret finally started with hesitation, "You must be wondering what happened between me and Elenore. And why was Vanessa here just now and the two of them left right after... well, where should I start?"

Laetitia could easily see Margaret's difficulty on bringing the subject so she decided to speak out and make things easier for her. "If this is about Elenore being in love with you, I already know that."

Margaret was taken by surprise by her words and suddenly felt that embarrassing feeling coming back. "Wait! How... how could you know about that? Was I the only one who hasn't realized it? Don't tell me you knew about this as well Madlax?" she asked a bit shocked.

"Don't be stupid, I already knew that." Madlax replied in a rather confident voice. "I've known for a long time, Vanessa sometimes talked about it when we were alone when it felt like when we were together facing the world alone." Madlax sighed. Suddenly the trio heard a sound from the front door and Margaret ran quickly hoping Elenore had returned.

Margaret got to the front just as Elenore and Vanessa walked in.

"Welcome home you two!" Margaret cheerfully greeted.

"Thank you Miss Margaret." Elenore replied in the same tone.

"Thanks Margaret. Could I have a word with you in private Margaret?"

"Umm...sure Vanessa." Margaret replied wondering what Vanessa had to say and then she guessed it had something to do with Elenore.

"Vanessa?"

"Vanessa!" Madlax exclaimed with tears in her eyes. "Where have you been? What happened?" The young blonde asked. Vanessa knew Madlax was here but she was a bit surprised at the reception she got. "I never thought I would see you here! Why did you come so unexpectedly?" Vanessa replied and hugged Madlax warmly. "Well I've been looking for work here but I took the invitation to stay while I'm looking" Madlax said.

"I'm glad to hear that. I don't want to be rude Madlax but I need to talk to Margaret." Vanessa said with her eyes looking toward Elenore. Madlax picked up on the subtle signal and gave a silent nod that she understood. "No problem, I'll be in the living room." Madlax said.

"Do you want some tea Madlax?" Elenore asked.

"No it's okay. I'm fine." Madlax replied as she went to the living room.

Margaret and Vanessa went to another part the house to have their talk. Elenore followed Madlax to the living room.

"Madlax, I want to apologize for my behavior earlier this evening." Elenore said apologetically.

"I understand. So don't worry about it."

"Thank you Madlax. May I ask you something? Well more like a couple of some things."

"Sure go ahead."

"I apologize in advance if my questions seem blunt but I really would like to know."

"Okay." Madlax agreed with a little apprehension.

"Where were you that day? And what were you doing?" Elenore asked placing one hand over her scar on her back.

Madlax again stared into the floor numbly and remorsefully. "Well, I did manage to clear them early. But when Limelda arrived, I couldn't resist." Madlax spoke quietly in a confessional tone. "I needed her, someone to remember me. I wanted her to remember my dance with guns, my face. I wanted someone to confirm my existence so badly that I forgot you Elenore; I didn't want to be fake, I didn't want to disappear. I'm sorry."

"Please don't think I'm mad at you, I knew the risks when I went with you. I was worried about you and hoped nothing had happened to you. As for what happened to me, there's enough blame to go around including myself..."

"Thank you Madlax for being honest with me and again I'm sorry if my questions seemed blunt, but I needed to know."

She could understand Madlax's need to be remembered and acknowledged as she nodded her head.

"Elenore?"

"Yes Madlax?"

"How did you get shot? When I got to the field and saw you lying there I thought either Friday Monday or Margaret had shot you."

Elenore told Madlax what had happened prior to her arrival at the field of flowers. Madlax felt a bit guilty.

"I'm sorry Elenore. But to be honest; you should've shot those soldiers. No one wouldn't have thought any less of you for protecting yourself."

"I know but no offence I'm..."

Madlax smiled briefly as if trying to act if she didn't feel guilty anymore than she did. "You're not a killer."

"Please Madlax I don't want to hurt your feelings. If I have I'm sorry. I do want to get to know you better." Elenore gave Madlax a warm hug.

Madlax hugged Elenore warmly, feeling for the first time the person deep beneath Elenore's inner armor.

"Thank You, Elenore I want to know you better too." She spoke softly and then they let go of each other as they heard footsteps.

"We ought to get you out of that uniform more often; you're almost a different person when you are."

Vanessa said jokingly as she, Margaret and Laetitia came into the room.

"Just because I act professionally doesn't mean I'm a different person." Elenore joked back.

Vanessa cocked an eyebrow. "Wait a minute are you calling me unprofessional, what gives you that impression?"

"Do you want a list?" Elenore joked.

Vanessa thought for a few seconds and then she and Elenore laughed.

Laetitia yawned loudly as to get everyone's attention. "I'm starting to feel sleepy already Elenore, could you help me get ready to bed please?" the little one asked with a sleepy voice. Sure she was tired from the long day, and it was past the bedtime for a child her age, though the main reason for Laetitia's plead

was to leave the scene for the night and give the two of them more privacy, as well as buy Margaret some time to get her act together. Elenore might have realized it right away, expecting no less from Laetitia, but still indulged the younger one's request, as it was usual for her to see her to bed every night anyway.

Even though she was officially off the clock, she didn't mind and she guessed what Laetitia was trying to do.

"Oh course, let's get you to bed." Elenore looked at the clock. "It's way pass your bedtime." Laetitia nodded and she let Elenore carry her to her room.

Laetitia could feel the difference between the Elenore of earlier and the one of now. It seemed to her at least she was the Elenore she saw and comforted her in that field of flowers not too long ago. But that chain was still there...

Elenore got Laetitia ready for bed and tucked her in. Before Elenore left Laetitia spoke; "I know there is something...no a few things bothering you. But those doors haven't been opened yet."

If it was anyone else's child that had said that to her, Elenore would've been a more than little creeped out.

But she knew out the three (?) Burton sisters, she seemed a great deal mature even for her age and got the feeling at least she was concerned with her well being. Elenore tried to think of a reply.

Elenore smiled warmly and said reassuringly. "Yes there is, but you shouldn't worry, all right. Now it's time to go to sleep. Good Night Laetitia." She hugged her and started to towards the door.

"Elenore..."

"Yes Laetitia?"

"I love you." Laetitia said in a sisterly way.

"Thank you Laetitia, I love you too." Elenore replied as she turned out the lights.

In the dark, Laetitia stared at the ceiling and at Elenore in the mindscape.

"Please remember that when the darkness comes..."

"Oh, that reminds me, I've wanted to ask about something too Madlax! I mean, I just never understood... who is this Limelda person exactly? How did you meet her? And why was she trying to kill you back then? When we came back to Nafrece and you left with her I thought you two must have become friends. Does she know you're in Nafrece now?" Margaret asked rather innocently.

After the moment of light-heartedness between Vanessa and Elenore, Margaret asked an innocent question about Limelda. But the question provoked some serious thought within Madlax, even though Limelda lived with Madlax since the Era; she was still in many ways an enigma she cannot comprehend.

"Limelda, she knows I'm in Nafrece. I met her couple of times through my missions; I remember meeting her in a tall building. Who she is? Well she is someone I still do not truly understand." Madlax answered in a slightly perplexed manner "But she's an honest person, at least with herself anyway." Madlax sighed.

"She originally wanted to kill me but as we met we felt we wanted to toy with each other more. There were nights where she spoke to me, deep inside all she wanted was to defeat me, subdue me, and make me submit to her in open battle." Madlax spoke clutching her hands to her chest. "I feel Limelda is my friend but sometimes I'm not sure. Whether she hates or loves me; she will always be a scary person."

Vanessa's feelings about Limelda Jorg were mixed; part of her was angry that she shot her (granted she was aiming for Madlax, but still...) and the fact because she wouldn't leave Madlax alone that Madlax left with her instead of herself. But on the other hand she did help get Elenore to the hospital and

provided a copy of the data which proved her parents and her innocence. Plus she didn't come with Madlax to Nafrece so maybe she could cut Limelda some slack.

"Honestly Madlax I think you're far better off not being near her. Hopefully I can help you find a suitable job here in Nafrece." Vanessa said to Madlax
Elenore came back into the living room just when Vanessa had finished talking to Madlax.

"Is that the woman who shot you, Vanessa?" Elenore asked with some concern.
Vanessa looked at Elenore, again her feelings were mixed. "Yes she was, but she also helped bring you to the hospital and for that I am grateful. I still have bitter feelings toward her though; I guess I haven't really forgiven her yet."

Elenore hugged Vanessa. "Promise me you won't let it eat at you..."
Vanessa felt Elenore's emotional warmth via the Torc and she smiled and hugged her in return.
"I promise. But seriously you're more your real self when you're out of uniform."
"Are we going to start this again?" Elenore said with an eyebrow raised and her head tilted.
Vanessa just shook her head with a smile and Elenore just let it go.

"Hmm... well, if Madlax and Vanessa were able to forgive her I think we should as well Elenore."
Margaret suggested rather lightly. "I actually just want to put all those horrible things that happened behind and hope we can all just enjoy what we have now. As long as this Limelda person doesn't come back to torment Madlax and shoot anyone we'll be ok, right?" she concluded optimistically then she remembered she wanted to talk to Elenore.

"Elenore."

"Yes Miss Margaret?"

"Can we talk?" Margaret asked decidedly, yet in an extremely humbled tone. Elenore looked at her for a brief moment, before nodding and following her. They went back to the dining room and sat at the table in front of each other. Margaret made an effort to look Elenore in the eye as she started talking.

"I talked with Vanessa about this... as you must know... and we both agreed that I probably shouldn't have said what I said. I mean the part about you working for me. I'm really sorry I said that! Especially because...it's really not important to me! You've been living with me in this house for as long as I can remember, and this is as much your home as it is mine. You know I trust you, and rely on you, and even indulge a bit and allow myself to be spoiled. That has nothing to do with the fact you are my maid, but because, for a long time, you've been the only family I have ever known. You're very important to me and I love you very much, just not the way you would have wanted me to. And I don't think I can ever apologize enough, if you feel I don't appreciate you the way you deserve, but I want you to know that I do! I know this is awkward for the both of us, and I understand if you'd rather not keep working for me, especially after the hurtful things I said.

But I want you to know that even if that's the case, I'll feel the exact same way about you, and I would like you to stay here, with me and Laetitia, forever. I want you to know that you're irreplaceable and we'd be really sad if you ever left us. So Elenore, if you can forgive me at all, please stay! I just want things to be all right! What do you say?"

Tears welled up in her eyes as she smiled.

"I'm sorry for what I said as well. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. You mean so much to me and I would do anything if it would make you happy." The tears slowly rolled down her cheeks. "I remember the first time you said those three words, it had been years since you had spoken but only that one word. It was when my mother died and I was crying in a corner of my room when you walked

up and hugged me and said I love you. That day I felt truly loved. I understand and accept that you can't love me the way I wish, but to know that you love me is good enough for me.

As for working for you I'll repeat something I said to you...; waking you up in the morning, brushing your hair, making your breakfast and seeing you off to school, cleaning the house, doing the shopping and making your dinner. Those are all I need to be happy. Plus to be with you and Laetitia forever is my wish and I will always forgive you no matter what..."

Elenore took a deep breath. "With that being said, I do have some personal issues that do need to be addressed by a professional. I made a promise to a friend I would do it, that and make time for me as well and maybe find that "someone" to share my happiness and wish with." She tilted her head so the bottom of her right ear was showing. "And I have one more thing to say and I mean it the way you answered when I asked you...you are and always will be my family..."

She thought for a few seconds and then asked. "Miss Margaret, I do have one question; I know that Laetitia is your sister but is Madlax?"

"Hmm, that's complicated..." Margaret wondered for a while, feeling far more at ease now, after having cleared things up with Elenore, and having guarantees that there were no hard feelings between them. "I guess you could call it that way; it'd be the best way to describe it in normal terms. You know she's originally a part of me, but she's an entirely different person with an individuality of her own, just like Laetitia.

Since we all come from the same place and share this bond it's not too far off to say we're sisters." Margaret concluded in a pleased tone.

"Should we join Madlax and Vanessa at the living room?" Margaret suggested. Elenore wiped the tears from her eyes and they both went to the living room.

Madlax sat on the main couch with Vanessa, the two women wrapping their arm around each other's shoulder. Privately Madlax reflected on this pleasant day and the painful memories of war escaped her conscious mind.

But creeping beneath the surface, her subconscious mind was brooding. Brooding who might kill her and her friends, brooding where there was new work and brooding whether the jobs will be enough to support her existence. Margaret would've been happy to support Madlax for life, but the thought felt rather uncomfortable.

"Vanessa, thank you for helping me, do you really have jobs out there for me?" Madlax asked. "Yes, but I don't know how good the offer is. After my trip in South America, I heard there was someone who was looking for an agent". Vanessa handed Madlax the note with the phone numbers which Madlax held firmly. Madlax peered sadly onto the floor, looking rather numb. "Madlax, what is it?" Vanessa asked. "I can't stay here too long, I will bring only pain and suffering to my friends" Vanessa stroked Madlax's hair and said softly "No you won't and thank you for keeping my promise when I had failed." Madlax turned around and hugged Vanessa tightly. "I don't want to lose you again Vanessa." Madlax spoke softly into Vanessa's ear just as Elenore and Margaret returned.

"Well... hmm... you three can stay here talking for as long as you want, but I'm feeling really sleepy right now, so I think I'm heading to bed already...", she admitted in a silly tone that revealed her sleepiness. "Oh, I figure you're staying for the night, right Vanessa? We can settle you in!" Margaret added rather hastily.

"I'll help you get ready Miss Margaret." Elenore said cheerfully.

Margaret said good night to Madlax and Vanessa and went up to her room, followed by Elenore. Recently, she had been occasionally trying to assure Elenore that she could get ready to bed on her own, especially when she was trying to act mature in front of Laetitia. But right now she was too tired and sleepy to really care or think about it.

Elenore helped Margaret get undressed and into her nightgown. As Margaret got into bed Elenore stood by the door. "Is there anything I can do for you Miss before you go to sleep?" She asked with a warm smile.

She almost let it slip her mind, but Elenore's question reminded Margaret of one more thing she felt she wanted to tell Elenore before going to sleep "Elenore, could you come sit by my side for a little while?", she asked. Elenore just complied and sit by the side of Margaret's bed, facing her, keeping the same warm smile.

Margaret leaned over towards her and rested her head on Elenore, pulling her closer into a warm hug and just staying that way for a few seconds before saying anything. "You know, Elenore... I really like to see you like this. You haven't been quite yourself for these last few months and I kinda missed your old warm self. It's good to have you back. And I don't know if it's like Vanessa said, about the uniform or not, but I'd like you to stay this way, because I really want you to be happy." Margaret said, before slowly letting go of the hug and looking up at her with a sleepy smile. "Good night Elenore! I love you!" Margaret said at last, before leaning back to her pillow, looking forward to sleep.

Elenore smiled as she got up from the bed. "I love you too and good night Miss and pleasant dreams." She turned off the light as Margaret's head hit the pillow and then quietly exited the room.

Listening to Margaret's admission of her cluelessness to how her maid felt about her and how everyone else knew but her provided some the evening's entertainment. She was going to go when Elenore and Vanessa Rene entered the house. Chloe listened and watched intently even though she thought the conversations were so sugar coated she thought she would get cavities. She looked though the dossier on Madlax and smiled evilly...

Limelda Jorg sneezed; it took her awhile, but she managed to get transport to Nafrece. Limelda Jorg looked at the night sky, the city lights obscured the view plus it was a bit colder than she was used to. She went through customs with no problems (the hefty bribes helped) and retrieved her gear.

"Madlax, you can't run from me. You are Mine now and forever and I WILL find you!" She thought herself.

She didn't know where in Nafrece Madlax was or even if she was still in the country. But she did have one lead; the girl Margaret Burton. Maybe she would know where Madlax might be. All it took was where to find Margaret Burton and that shouldn't take very long. She walked out into the Nafrece night, thinking of Madlax...

Chapter 4. A Celtic woman that picks flowers

On the other side of the Atlantic in Mexico; Nadie and Ellis had been on move keeping one step ahead of the Coven. So far they managed to do so with few problems, but the lifestyle was starting to get to them both. They both wondered why the Coven took an interest in them again after so long. After the events in Wiñay Marka the Coven stopped their pursuit. Now after a year the Coven once again came after them though they came close to capturing them in the last town if it weren't for the unintentional interference of the local drug cartel. Nadie had been driving for nearly ten hours straight and it was beginning to show on her face.

Ellis noticed the look on her friend's face and wondered what she could do. Then she saw in the distance the outskirts of a small town. "Nadie there's a town ahead, let's stop and rest."

Nadie was going to argue but she knew that Ellis had a point and it would be only a matter of time before they got into an accident.

They drove into the town with Ellis looking for a place to safely park or at least keep the car from being easily spotted. They found a public parking lot and parked. Nadie wanted to rest but it was too dangerous to sleep in the car. They got out and went out to the main road.

"We can stay here the night, if we can find some place." Nadie said looking over the cluster of buildings that made up the town.

As they walked towards the center of town, the pair passed an old woman selling trinkets on a blanket. Ellis stopped and looked as Nadie continued walking. The old woman was selling native crafts along with the odd piece of silver jewelry. One piece stood out from the rest; It looked like it wasn't made around here, the designs on the bracelet looked like knots intertwining with each other.

"May I look at it?" Ellis asked pointing at the bracelet. The old woman nodded and Ellis picked it up and looked at. She could feel something benign from it but nothing else.

"How much for this?" Ellis asked with a smile.

The old woman squinted at the bracelet and at Ellis. "Oh that thing, I've had that for years and I've never been able to sell it. People say it's cursed or something."

"I don't think so, it's very pretty. I like to buy it." Ellis said digging in her pocket for money, but she could pull out was a few coins and she frowned.

The old woman reached out to Ellis' hand and felt the coins in her hand and then took them and smiled.

"This will do child, I'm glad somebody was willing to buy this. May it bring you good fortune child."

Ellis smiled and said "Thank you." She could hear Nadie calling out for her and she ran to her.

Ellis turned to look at the old woman, but she was gone...

When she had caught up to Nadie she noticed she had a tired smile on her face.

"I found a place. Hopefully we can rest awhile before "they" show up." Nadie said pointing down the street.

"I don't see why we can't ask Blueeyes for help?" Ellis asked as they walked down the street.

Nadie barely turned her toward Ellis and answered in a tired voice. "I rather not risk calling Blueeyes unless we really need to. For all we know she could be back working for them."

Ellis frowned but she realized that Nadie had a good point.

"What about Ricardo?"

Nadie sighed. "I really don't think he'll want to get involved. And then there's Lirio to consider, there's a chance they maybe after her as well."

"Oh" Ellis said dejectedly.

The pair walked for five minutes till they got to a small hotel. After checking in the pair went to the room. The room was small but they didn't care. After making sure the door was locked behind them Nadie collapsed on the bed and fell asleep. Ellis yawned and she laid next to Nadie and fell asleep.

Across the Atlantic in Nafrece Altena surveyed the vineyard as twilight fell over the landscape. The report she received brightened her mood. She knew the Ring of Morrigan was in Nafrece and now the Torc of Rhiannon was there as well. With two of the artifacts practically in her backyard and the Bracelet of Brigid soon to come if the law of attraction held true. She didn't want to use such obvious "pagan" artifacts but Enfant's obsessive search for them meant they were worth something and if it meant using them to keep them out of their hands, so be it. Besides the current courier of the Torc of Rhiannon headed straight to where Altena had predicted. Straight to the "key"...straight to the little seed she planted so long ago.

But there were a few snags; the first was Enfant's leader in Europe. He was proving to be a real thorn in her side. The only concrete information about she knew about him was his name; Douglas Rosenberg. But the man connected to that name supposedly died a year ago. There was a chance they were the same person. After all didn't she fake her own death...Altena grinned on that.

The best Altena could do was keep Enfant away from the Torc which lead to the second snag; her agents could force both the courier and "key" to go into hiding. This was easily solved. By having Chloe watching them she could keep track of their movements. Also she could have her agents back off enough to give the illusion of safety. Hopefully the "key" Margaret Burton would find the ring as well and then once the Bracelet showed itself she would collect all three along with their "keys".

Then there was the matter of the two rotten saplings. Eliminating them was turning out to be no small task and now they were in Nafrece produced a potential problem; The Justicars might take notice and take action. For now Altena and the Soldats would have to keep a low profile if they didn't want to alert them. Once she had the three the Le Grand Retour could begin at last. She wrote down orders and passed them to a nun.

While she slept Ellis found herself standing in a moonlit field all alone.

"Nadie!" Ellis cried out to no avail. For some reason she was running from hands that were trying to grab her. Ellis seemed to run forever trying desperately to get away from the grasping hands.

When all hope seemed lost she heard Nadie's voice. "Ellis...Run toward the light."

"Nadie?"

"Run toward the light."

Ellis saw two lights in the distance and she willed herself to run towards them.

As she drew closer the lights turned into bonfires. The closer she got to the bonfires the less the hands tried to grab her.

Ellis ran between the bonfires and suddenly she was in a hut.

The inside of the hut was quite large. In the middle was a fire pit with a warm fire burning brightly.

On the other side of the fire pit Ellis saw a woman sitting on a primitive chair. She tried moving closer but her legs turned leaden.

"Welcome." The woman across from her said in a British accent.

Ellis felt the woman's eyes penetrate her.

"Interesting, I can see why they are interested in you Plentyn y Blodau. Mankind has once again regained the knowledge once held by Math. So tell me Plentyn y Blodau, what do you desire?"

Ellis didn't understand what this woman was talking about. She panicky looked around for Nadie.

An image of Nadie appeared in the fire and Ellis reached out to touch the image but found that she could not move closer to the fire.

“Nadie!” Ellis cried out trying to reach the image. Then the image of her and Nadie traveling appeared. Ellis realized that it wasn’t really Nadie in the fire so she calmed down.

“I see, you wish to be with your friend and to travel free of your enemies. I can help with that.”

“You can?” Ellis asked a bit confused.

“Yes, but you must do a favor for me in return.”

“All I need you to do put on this.” An image of the bracelet appeared in the fire.

“Okay.” Ellis agreed as she reached into the fire not realizing that she could move. Just as she was about to touch the flames she woke up. She rubbed her eyes and looked around the room for Nadie.

“Oh good, you’re up. You should take a shower before we go.” Nadie said coming out of the bathroom.

“Yes sir.” Ellis said with a smile.

Ellis finished her shower and got dressed. Just before she left the bathroom she took the bracelet out her jacket pocket. She gazed at it in curiosity. She put it on and closed her eyes.

She opened one eye to peek but nothing happened and she relaxed.

“Come on hurry up.” She heard Nadie say from behind the door.

Ellis shrugged her shoulders and assumed the woman’s request was just a dream.

“Yes sir.” She said leaving the bathroom.

When they left the hotel the sun hadn’t risen yet. They slowly made their way to the car and just before they reached the parking lot Nadie stopped.

“Nadie?” Ellis asked before Nadie made the Shhh sign.

The lot was quiet, too quiet. Nadie tried to see into the darkness as much as she could. “Do you see anything Ellis?” Nadie asked in whisper knowing that Ellis could pick up on it.

“I can see a couple bodies on the ground, but other than that don’t see anything.”

Nadie pulled out her gun and the pair slowly made their way to car. Halfway there Ellis pulled Nadie out the way before she was shot.

Nadie began to notice the lot had gotten brighter. Then she looked in wonder at Ellis; Ellis was source of the light! Bullets raced toward them with deadly accuracy. Just before they got close Ellis held out her arms and spread her fingers. The light surrounded them both and bullets melted on contact with the light. Nadie noticed one of the bodies on the ground. It was a Caucasian man in a black suit. A broken pair of sunglasses and a revolver was nearby. Nadie’s attention was drawn away by Ellis.

“YOU WILL NOT HARM US! YOU WILL LEAVE US ALONE!!!” Ellis shouted as jets of flames shot from her fingertips and stuck from what she could see now were the ninjas from the Coven. As the jets struck them they were overwhelmed by the flames and were incinerated on the spot.

As the last ninja died the light dimmed and Ellis stared out her hands wondering.

“H...how did I do that?” Ellis said in shock looking at her hands.

Nadie surmised that since Ellis didn’t really know how powerful she was did it by instinct. She gently grabbed Ellis by the arm and said. “We have to get out of here before anyone else shows up. So let’s go” Ellis somewhat still meekly followed and got in the car and once they got out the parking lot sped away. A few minutes and miles later Ellis was still looking at her hands.

“You going to be okay?” Nadie asked worriedly.

“I guess it wasn’t a dream after all...” Ellis said dejectedly.

“What dream? What are you talking about?” Nadie asked with a bit of confusion.

Ellis told Nadie what she could of about the dream.

“Plentyn y Blodau? What does that mean? And what did she mean the knowledge held by Math?”

“I don’t know...I wish I knew...”

Third Moon Rising

“What about that bracelet?” Nadie asked now curious about the bracelet.

“Oh...” Ellis tried to take it off but she found it wouldn’t even come off. “It won’t come off.”

“Okay that tares it, once we get to a big city I’m going to call Blueeyes. She might know something.”

“Why a big city?”

“There’s less chance of the Coven trying to pull something blatant.”

“Do you think Blueeyes will help?”

“I hope so...I really do...” Nadie said as they drove on as the sun began to rise.

Chapter 5. Moonlight Tea Party Madlax style

As she closed the door behind her, she smiled. "Margaret's right, I haven't been myself lately but Vanessa has a good point. When I am out of uniform I'm free to truly be myself, perhaps I should ask Margaret for "time" for myself." She thought to herself. Then a small voice echoed in her mind. "What about your promise to Grandpa?"

Quietly to herself she answered. "Well, Miss Margaret is growing up and become more mature and less dependent on me. But then again there are those criminals and I can't protect her alone. I'm going to need help for all our sakes and I think I know who to ask."

She walked to the living room and up to Madlax. "Madlax, I don't know if Vanessa has explained the situation to you. Please, I would really like your help in protecting Miss Margaret. If need be, I can pay you out my own salary."

Vanessa looked at Elenore and then at Madlax and smiled. "That's good idea Elenore and I'm sure Margaret would agree as well. Well Madlax, your first day in Nafrece and already you have a job offer. What do you say?" Both Elenore and Vanessa looked at Madlax for an answer.

Madlax thought the offer was enticing but had her reservations. "Well, Madlax?" Vanessa asked. "I like to but are you sure? I didn't save either of you last time and barely saved Margaret from Friday Monday." said a little humbly.

"Why don't you try it for a little while? You can leave anytime you want." Vanessa offered.

"Okay, just a little bit" Madlax answered. "Great, you can start in the morning" Elenore answered.

The girls then waved goodnight and Madlax went to the bedroom. She lay on the bed in her nightgown, staring into the beam of moonlight out the window. She tried to sleep but she just couldn't, protecting Margaret was too urgent to hold till tomorrow morning. If Limelda showed up here there will be a gunfight, or worse there might be villains lurking in the shadows, perhaps even one grander than Friday Monday in Gazth-Sonika. Madlax put on her gear, clipped on her trusty SIG P210s and went out into the Burton garden from the window. "This is where I'll sleep tonight". Madlax told herself.

"I'll go prepare a room for you Vanessa. And thanks for what you've done." Elenore said relieved that at least Madlax was willing to help. "You're welcome Elenore, just remember your promise." Vanessa replied.

"I will." Elenore said as she led Vanessa to another guest room.

Chloe smiled. Tonight was very informative and entertaining. She watched Madlax go out of the window and into the garden. She was making it was making it easy for her. Lady Altena didn't say anything about her and since she's out of the house there's little chance she would be seen by Elenore, Margaret or the "Key".

She motioned to the trio of Soldats that were sent to relieve her and they stalked their way towards Madlax with weapons drawn.

On a nearby rooftop, Limelda watched the Burton home through a pair of binoculars, she too watched Madlax go out into the garden.

She smiled. "There you are Madlax. I told you, you'll never hide from me." She noticed movement heading towards Madlax. She spotted at least three men in black suits with guns drawn.

"Damn it must be Enfant. I won't allow it. If anyone is ever going to kill Madlax, it's going to be ME!" She pulled out her sniper rifle and peered through the scope. There she spotted the men and a purple haired boy (?)/girl (?) wearing a green cloak trailing behind them using the men as cover. She saw the one with the cloak pull out a pair of throwing knives and saw it was a girl.

Chloe smiled as she pulled out her knives. This was too easy, perhaps Madlax's reputation was overrated she thought to herself she threw the knives.

In an amazing feat of marksmanship Limelda shot the two knives in mid flight and both clanked to ground alerting Madlax to the danger and then she took aim at one the men and fired. She couldn't get a good shot at the purple haired girl as she was ducking for cover.

Damn Enfant! Chloe cursed to herself as of the men fell to what appeared to be a sniper. She had get out the line of fire and quick. Whoever it was they were a crack shot to be able to shoot her knives in mid flight.

Now she had tend to this and a now alert Madlax. And the night was so wonderful...

Madlax laid herself near a tree behind the bushes and roses sleeping though just half asleep but highly aware method of rest. She felt in the back of her mind people were stalking her looking at her like a piece of prey asking to be consumed. "It'll good to give them a false impression of I'm completely unaware" she thought and pretended to sleep. In that silence she can hear the pistols drawn and the sense Limelda was watching her through her scope. But that tranquility of certainty was broken when she felt these knives thrown at her.

Madlax was surprised she didn't sense this at all until know, "How could this be?" she gasped. She wanted to wait till the last moment to move but then that familiar sound.

The familiar sound of Limelda's PSG-1 rung into her ears, "it's gotta be her" she thought to herself.

Madlax saw the two daggers falling into the ground and there were a couple of people with guns hidden as she turned her head across. Madlax fired quickly taking down one of them and he flew into the oak tree. The rustling sound of the leaves gave away the position of the men and Madlax rushed into them. The black suited men were not much opposition and Madlax spectacularly shot both of them with her eyes closed as she spun in a twirl. But the purple haired girl who started bolting in a cloak was a different matter, she comfortably dodged her bullets and Limelda's and was running towards the dense scrubs to hide in the corner of the Burton complex.

Madlax followed in pursuit and the few extra pounds did make her a little sluggish but she still leapt into the scrubs.

Madlax fell onto Chloe and the two women gave each other rather astounded looks as their bodied huddled together facing each other side by side. But quickly the young girl looked rather cross as she saw the flicker of her blonde hair and chest in the moonlight. "So Enfant agent, now why are you suddenly so angry, do I remind you of someone?" Madlax asked.

Chloe didn't know what she was more angry about; The fact her attack was foiled and was forced to flee and then being crashed into by Madlax, Enfant sticking their nose in (via the sniper), or just the fact that Madlax did remind her of that damn Mireille and she that she called her an agent of Enfant. "I'm not one those losers." She spat out. She threw two more knives which Madlax easily dodged. "This is far from over Madlax." She said as she made a hasty retreat, she dreaded telling Lady Altena but she knew she would forgive her considering Enfant got in the way and greatly underestimated Madlax.

Meanwhile inside the house Elenore and Vanessa heard gunfire. "Miss Margaret! I have to check if she's all right!" Elenore said worriedly.

Both women ran to Margaret's room and burst in only to see Margaret still apparently asleep. Both of them breathed a sigh of relief. "Elenore see if Madlax needs help, I'll stay here with Margaret." Vanessa said to the relieved but still concerned Elenore.

"I'll have to go get my body armor and taser first." Elenore said and Vanessa nodded and Elenore headed to her room leaving Vanessa alone with Margaret.

Vanessa's eyes glowed and she unbuttoned the top buttons on her blouse and removed the previously irremovable Torc from her neck and placed it around Margaret's neck. Then she stepped back far enough from the bed and then collapsed into unconsciousness.

Elenore ran to her room, threw off her dress and put on her body armor and uniform and grabbed her taser and ran towards the garden. She looked out onto the garden and yelled for Madlax. She gasped as she saw at first the two knives on the ground and then the corpses of three men. "I hope she's all right?" She said to herself as she saw movement in the bushes.

Madlax saw an infuriated Chloe flee with considerable disgust. The cloaked girl certainly left an impression on her. "She is certainly part of this unknown organization. They must very powerful to have people like her." She thought. Madlax wanted to chase Chloe but her client came first, the feeling of failing Eric Gillian resonating in her psyche. As she was standing up, a shot whizzed past her. Madlax decided to tease Limelda again prancing around and evading another couple of PSG-1 shots which hit a small Helianthus patch near the back garden. Limelda came into the dim light with her pistols drawn. "Oh Madlax, still so confident you are a bigger and plumper target these days you know". Limelda said quite cheekily.

"Quiet down Limelda, people are sleeping" Madlax whispered. "How about some hand to hand combat then" Limelda asked.

Madlax dropped her pistols without hesitation but as soon as Limelda sensed the gun leaving her hand, she drew a pistol from a hidden holster. "You are mine Madlax, I will kill you". Madlax put her hands in the air and said "You got me Limelda." with her head tilted downward. Limelda smiled with a big smirk but during that small gap in concentration, Madlax slid to the ground and kicked her pistol into Limelda. The pistol hits her arm and Madlax charged, trying to take advantage of the confusion. Although surprised, Limelda pulled a wicked roundhouse which Madlax easily evades and fires her Beretta but the bullet just scrapes the blonde's silky hair. Madlax flawlessly somersaults behind her and braces Limelda's neck with her arm strongly causing her to drop her pistol. "Tsk, Tsk, Sneaky Limelda, sneaky" Madlax whispers in her ear.

"Well what now, Madlax?" Limelda asked. "Let's go inside and have something to eat." Madlax replies. Limelda was rather surprised "They wouldn't mind?" "Only if you are on your best behavior!" Madlax smiles chirpily.

Limelda reluctantly agreed and walked slowly to the main door with her with the moonlight dimly illuminating their path. "What a girl" Limelda thought to herself. "What a girl"

Elenore ran out to the garden, taser in hand. She spotted Madlax with some purple haired woman next to her walking towards her. She ran towards them enough to get in firing range of her taser.

"Is that the maid?" Limelda asked noticing Elenore running towards them.

"Elenore, yeah that's her. She doesn't look too happy. Let me talk to her, okay." Madlax replied.

"Fine." Limelda said stopping herself from reaching for her pistol.

Elenore ran and pointed the taser at Limelda. "Madlax are you all right and who this with you?"

"I'm fine Elenore, we had some visitors but I don't think they were with Enfant. Limelda and I took care of them." Madlax said trying to reassure Elenore.

Limelda smiled looking at the taser Elenore was pointing at her. "Didn't know Heckler and Koch made tasers. By the way you're looking better than the last time I saw you."

Elenore looked a bit confused. "Do I know you?"

"I'm the one who helped Madlax and your employer bring you to the hospital. I'm Limelda Jorg."

"Well I guess I owe you thanks. But wait aren't you the one who shot Vanessa?"

Limelda looked at Elenore calmly. "You're welcome and yes I shot Vanessa Rene, but she wasn't who I was aiming for." Before Elenore could speak Madlax put her hand on Elenore's taser and lowered it. "Let's get inside before anyone else shows up. Oh, Elenore could you please make us some tea and something to eat." Madlax said smiling.

Elenore was a bit flabbergasted at first, but recovered. "Sure. We have some Earl Gray at the moment, will that do?"

"Sure that will be fine." Madlax replied smiling as the trio went into the house and Madlax and Limelda made themselves comfortable in the living room. "I have to go check on Laetitia and Miss Margaret. Then I will return to make tea." Elenore said politely as she left the pair.

Elenore opened the door to Laetitia's room and looked inside. There she saw Laetitia sitting up rubbing her eyes. "What's going on Elenore? I heard gunshots" Laetitia asked groggily.

Elenore breathed a sigh of relief.

"Everything's all right, just stay here and go back to sleep. Okay?" Elenore replied reassuringly.

Laetitia nodded and lay back down and as Elenore left she smiled. "The doors are beginning to open and some will find their door of truth..." She said to herself as could hear Elenore run towards Margaret's room.

As Elenore opened the door to Margaret's room she saw that Vanessa was sprawled on the floor unconscious. She rushed to Vanessa's side. "Vanessa!

Wake up Vanessa! Please be all right!" She loudly said with her eyes tearing as it this reminded her of that terrible day she found Vanessa laying on the ground dead. She didn't notice that Torc was gone or that Margaret was stirring.

Margaret's sleep was suddenly interrupted by the noise of Elenore's voice nearby, as she called Vanessa's name in a loud panicked tone. She opened her eyes and got up on her bed quickly, as if awakening from a nightmare.

She felt this intense emotion of fear taking over, and it didn't take her long to realize why, as she looked to the side and saw Vanessa lying on the floor unconscious, as a worried Elenore attended to her. What she didn't realize right away was the Torc now around her neck, as its power grew stronger, bonding to its true bearer.

"What happened, Elenore?" Margaret asked worried as she approached them hurriedly, "What happened to Vanessa?"

"I don't know Miss. I came back here to check on you two after I checked on Laetitia and I found her on the floor." Elenore said teary eyed.

"Please Vanessa, get up!" Elenore said loudly and Vanessa began to stir.

Vanessa groaned for a little bit and sat up quickly with tears in her eyes.

"They're dead. They were murdered and thrown in a nameless grave. For nothing..." Vanessa said her hands covering her face. Elenore hugged Vanessa and asked worriedly.

"Vanessa, what happened?"

"I was standing here looking at Margaret, when I received these visions of my parents being taken away and then executed and thrown into a pit and that was the last thing I remember before waking up and talking to you."

Vanessa felt around her neck and looked at Elenore in horror. "The Torc! It's gone!"

Elenore noticed that the Torc had disappeared from Vanessa's neck.

"Where could've it gone?" Elenore asked.

The response shocked both Elenore and Vanessa as they heard Margaret's voice but it had an older and with a slight Welsh accent.

"Fear not. The Torc is now on its destined bearer. Thank you Vanessa Rene for bringing me here, though you had no conscious thought of doing so and as a reward, sad and tragic as it may be you were shown the truth about the fate of your parents. I wish I could've granted you something better, but that was the strongest desire in your mind. I hope you find peace..."

With that Margaret blinked and her voice returned to normal.

"Hmm... did I just say something? I can't remember..." Margaret said out loud to herself, confused, but as she noticed Vanessa and Elenore her attention was brought back to the urgency of the situation at hand "What happened Vanessa? Are you all right? I just woke up with the noise and there seems to be some sort of commotion going on... What happened?" she asked both of them, wondering why they were looking at her with such surprised expressions.

"The Torc, it's around Miss Margaret's neck! Why did it choose her? Can we get it off? Why did Miss Margaret's voice sound different just then?"

Elenore asked with equal parts shock, worry and the feeling that any sense of normalcy just went out the window and down the street and heading to the local dive for a few pints and hit on seedy men.

"I don't know but I do know it won't come off unless it wants to. Why it chose her, I don't know either. As for her voice that I do know, it was the spirit of the Torc talking through Margaret. I wish I could give you better answers." Vanessa said wiping the tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry I've dragged you all into this." Vanessa said apologetically.

"What? What are you talking about?" Margaret asked in surprise and fear as she brought her hand to her neck and touched the Torc, trying to remove it immediately. "What is this thing and where did it come from?"

I didn't have it before! What do you mean it choose me? She questioned anxiously as she kept trying to remove it with no success, which only made her increasingly more nervous about it.

"It's okay. The spirit or whatever it is said you didn't do on purpose. It wanted you to come here. But I still would like to know why it chose her, but I get the feeling we're not going to get that answer soon. And besides there was a gunfight outside, but I couldn't see anyone out there." Elenore replied a bit worried if she should mention Limelda.

"Did you mention a gunfight outside? Is Madlax all right?" she asked worried about Madlax.

"Hopefully Madlax took care of it, I would ask you to go back out there but I don't what would happen next if you left." Vanessa sadly spoke.

"She's in the living room at the moment with an unusual guest." Elenore said in a ironic tone.

"Oh, who is it Elenore?" Margaret asked briefly forgetting about the Torc.

Elenore glanced at Vanessa before answering. "A Miss Limelda Jorg is here to see Madlax Miss."

Vanessa sighed and suppressed the urge to swear. Then she sighed again and came to the conclusion that reality decided to skip out and join normalcy at the pub and hit on the same men normalcy was hitting on just to be a total bitch. "Let me explain about the Torc then we'll deal with Limelda." Vanessa said somewhat dejectedly.

"Elenore, would you go and make some tea please." Margaret asked.

"Yes Miss." Elenore replied and left the room but not before she glanced at the pair sympathically.

Vanessa then explained what she knew about the Torc to Margaret who listened intently.

The whole incident made Margaret completely forget about sleep, as unusual as that was for her. All this information about the Torc was too sudden and complicated for her. Adding to the fact she could not remove it from her neck, it made Margaret feel very uneasy. She sure wasn't expecting to get involved on anything of this magnitude ever again since the incident with the books that happened less

than a year ago. Most importantly, she wasn't interested in pursuing whatever purpose this Torc had for her, and would rather just get rid of it or give it to someone else. Not to mention she wasn't willing to sacrifice any of her friends again, because this time they might very well not come back. She decided to get dressed and went downstairs with Vanessa, quietly enough not to wake Laetitia up, to see what exactly was going on.

As they got to the living room they could see Madlax talking with someone. Vanessa seemed to recognize her immediately and she looked rather disturbed by her presence there. Only after a while did Margaret remember who she was. "Oh right, that scary Limelda person! I wonder what she's doing here..." Margaret mentioned to Vanessa, temporarily forgetting about the problematic Torc, as Limelda's presence at her house was an interesting enough occurrence.

She approached them easily and stretched her hand at Limelda, introducing herself. "Hi, I'm Margaret Burton. I've wanted to thank you, for helping Elenore before. I heard you are Madlax's friend! Welcome to my place! Hmm... About the rest... I know we all have done things we regret in the past, but it would be nice if we could all just put that behind us and get along, right?, she said politely with a smile.

Limelda took Margaret's hand and shook it. "I'm Limelda Jorg and your welcome. Thank you. You have a very nice place here and yes I am Madlax's friend." She said with smile glancing at Madlax and then at Vanessa. "That was an unfortunate incident and I don't want to cause a scene in your lovely home." She said at Margaret and indirectly to Vanessa who didn't look too happy to see her.

Vanessa was about to say something unpleasant, but she held her tongue given where she was and Margaret's indirect request. So she sat across from Limelda, both women staring and smiling politely at each other. Margaret sat next to Vanessa and waited for Elenore to come with tea.

The four of them sat in an awkward silence in that what seemed to Vanessa a agonizing long time till she heard Elenore's voice. "I thought I heard you come down Miss." Elenore said emerging from the kitchen with a tray with five cups and saucers, a large tea pot and the condiments and silverware. She placed the tray on the table began to serve tea, first to Margaret and then to the others. Then she poured herself a cup and sat down next to Margaret. She noticed the quiet tension in the air.

"Miss Jorg, earlier you said you were surprised that Heckler and Koch made tasers. How did you know it was made by that company?" Elenore asked hoping to break the tension. Limelda stopped staring at Vanessa to look at Elenore. "That's quite simple; it says it on the barrel. I also noticed it didn't have any wire extension. Is it wireless?"

"Yes, it's the newest wireless model; it can hold about six darts and can incapacitate a large person or animal for a few minutes." Elenore replied.

Limelda nodded. "Impressive, so what's the range?"

"About six meters accurately, but you need to be in three for the capacitor to release its charge."

Elenore said with a raised eyebrow.

"Still that's not bad." Limelda said still impressed.

Vanessa looked at Elenore and Limelda in some disbelief, with that had just happened these two were talking about a taser as if they were at a gun show.

"Ah, I suppose you know a lot about guns, don't you? Margaret asked Limelda curiously, between sipping her tea and getting startled at how hot it was "Oh, it's hot!", she noted out loud, half surprised and half embarrassed at this silly habit of always getting her tongue burnt when drinking freshly made tea. "Is that why you and Madlax get along so well, since you both seem to deal with guns a lot?" She asked casually while blowing at her tea trying to cool it down enough so she could drink it.

"Yes I do. Though I was surprised that a company that makes handguns; would start making tasers." Limelda replied.

"Be careful Miss it's still quite hot." Elenore chimed in after Margaret burnt her tongue on the tea and then turned to Limelda. "Well they started that product line last year to compete with Colt, Steyr, and Mashino. I found that their model was the best for my needs and the excellent service warranty is quite robust with free upgrades."

"That's unusual for that company to offer that, but if they're competing against those three you mentioned it's not surprising. May I take a closer look at it?" Limelda asked.

"Of course." Elenore removed the clip from the taser and handed it to Limelda who looked it over and weighed it in her hands and handing back to Elenore with Vanessa looking in utter shock.

"Thank you. Quite a hefty piece even for a taser. If it was a regular handgun the recoil probably snap your wrist every time you fired it." Limelda said.

"You're welcome. Would you like some more tea?" Elenore asked.

"Yes thank you. Do you have any more of those biscuits?" Limelda asked in return.

"Yes we do. I'll go get some more." Elenore replied noticing that Margaret had a quite few near her. Elenore got up and started to head to the kitchen taking the plate that held the biscuits with her.

"How can everyone be so calm? Next thing you know somebody would ask for the lights to be turned out so we can all drink tea in the moonlight or a white rabbit will show up." Vanessa asked somewhat in shock.

"A white rabbit? What are you talking about?" Madlax queried with a puzzled look on her face.

"I believe Miss Rene here was talking about Alice in Wonderland." Limelda replied looking at Vanessa with some amusement.

"Alice in where?" Madlax asked even more confused.

"Oooh, I like that story. I think Elenore read it to Laetitia last week or was it last night?" Margaret chimed in between taking bites from the pile of biscuits near her.

"Alice in Wonderland is a story about a girl who winds up in a strange place. One of the scenes in the story Alice finds herself in a "mad tea party" where the party goers' do and say crazy things." Vanessa explained so that Madlax could understand while looking right at Limelda. She inwardly smiled at the thought of stuffing Limelda into a teapot.

"So what brings you to Nafrece Miss Jorg?" Vanessa continued as she verbally dueled with Limelda as Elenore returned from the kitchen with a full plate of biscuits.

"Why to see Madlax of course. I figured you've would've been busy with the maid here since you two seemed to be very chummy in the hospital. Besides I think you two would make a very nice couple." Limelda answered politely.

Elenore blushed six shades of red and looked at Limelda and then to Vanessa who was speechless and blushing as well.

The gentle breeze from the window swept across Madlax's hair, all she really wanted to do was enjoy the moment. She felt serene, the biscuits fresh and none of the chatter really interested or bothered her. But the sensation was a little surreal too, having someone who shot and practically killed you have a quiet and civilized chat must be odd for Vanessa. Suddenly Vanessa sarcastically suggested turning off the lights, but it felt right for Madlax. "What a great idea, Vanessa, let's turn out the lights Elenore?" Madlax said totally air-heading out Alice in Wonderland.

"Yeah, I'd like that too." Margaret said softly. "We have large windows and no buildings around, so we can get a pretty clear view of the night sky if we open the curtains." She added. "Would you please do that Elenore?" Margaret tilted her head to the side and asked with a smile, before sipping her tea again "Ah, it's still hot!" she giggled to herself.

"Yes...Miss." Elenore stammered as she rose from the chair. She shut off the lights and then opened the curtains her face still blushing from Limelda's comment.

"Vanessa and me? A couple? The thought has crossed my mind a few times, but she's involved with Madlax and I already had my heart broken once tonight. But still..." She thought to herself as she opened the curtains and she stared at the moon, its light pouring into the room. She turned around, her eyes adjusting to the light.

She looked at Vanessa briefly and then spoke hoping no one noticed that she was still blushing. "There we go, does anyone need more tea?"

"Miss Jorg, do you have any place to stay the night?" Margaret asked innocently enough.

"No, I don't. I arrived in Nafrece just a few hours ago." Limelda politely replied.

"Oh, why don't you stay here for the night? I can have Elenore prepare a room for you." Margaret warmly offered.

Vanessa looked a little uncomfortable just as Elenore did, but thankfully the dim light hid her face. She knew that Margaret was being her usual kind self and meant no malice but it still made her uncomfortable knowing that Limelda was in the same house with Madlax and her.

"I guess I'm going have to confront them both..." She thought to herself. Thinking of faces; she noticed that Elenore's turned six shades of red before she turned out the lights. *"I'll ask her about that later..."* She thought and giggled to herself.

Limelda smiled in the moonlight. "Why thank you Miss Burton for your generous offer. I accept and I do apologize for coming at such a late hour." Limelda again replied politely, internally pleased that she would be near to Madlax.

"Yeah right..." Vanessa thought to herself.

"I'll go prepare a room Miss." Elenore said her face still slightly red but thankfully the lighting in room hid that.

The turning off the lights was a small gesture, but it gave Madlax a great sense of joy. She felt like an angel of moonlight with a similar innocence to the time she met Gwen McNicol. Rather ironic for a harbinger of death such as herself; but this young lady has many contradictions.

Madlax felt a slight stroking sensation on her leg beneath the table and she turned her head towards Vanessa. Vanessa smiled and sipped a part of her hot tea but that did not give a hint of who it was.

"How's the tea, Vanessa?" Madlax asked "Oh its fine Madlax" Vanessa replied in a slightly irritated tone turning her glance towards Limelda.

Madlax tried to smile and avoid the thought of Limelda. She looked at Margaret and regained the aura of innocence that emanated from Margaret.

"You're not burning your tongue anymore?" she asked "Uh, no" Margaret giggled. This eased tension a bit and after a little friendly banter, Margaret had asked Limelda politely about staying.

"Limelda certainly wouldn't refuse but which room will she ask for?" She thought. Luckily Limelda didn't ask for a room next to hers but she felt she had to talk to Vanessa and Elenore who were hiding a thin layer of discomfort about the whole situation.

Elenore went upstairs to prepare a room for Limelda. As she was preparing the room she heard footsteps in the hallway and went to investigate. She saw Vanessa walking towards the main bathroom. "Is there anything you need, Vanessa?" Elenore asked with some concern for her friend.

"No just need to use the bathroom, but thanks anyway Elenore." Vanessa replied as she went to the bathroom. Elenore went back to preparing the room while she was doing so do she thought to herself. *"Why did Margaret invite that woman to stay? She knows how Vanessa feels about her, but then again Margaret is Margaret. I don't think she meant any harm by doing so. But it's going to cause problems that I can be sure of."*

"I'm sorry; I've gotten you two into another of my messes."

Elenore's train of thought was interrupted by a voice behind her and turned and saw Vanessa standing in the doorway.

"It's not your fault. You came here to help me and I doubt that you knew what was going to happen." Elenore said trying to comfort Vanessa.

"It's been a very bizarre night and I have no idea what going to happen next." Vanessa wearily said.

"You're not just upset with Miss Jorg about the shooting are you?" Elenore asked raising an eyebrow.

"No, it's the fact she won't leave her alone and it doesn't help when Madlax bounces between us. I'm really afraid of having to place an ultimatum in front of her." Vanessa replied with some sadness in her voice.

"You really do love Madlax, don't you?" Elenore asked in a understanding tone trying to comfort Vanessa.

"Yes, but I wonder if she really loves me or does she love Limelda?" Vanessa asked out loud to no one in particular.

"Well from what I've seen, those two have a lot in common. But I can see why Madlax would be attracted to you." Elenore answered.

"You can, how?" Vanessa asked wondering what Elenore was getting at.

"You're an intelligent, beautiful and loving woman, who wouldn't be." Elenore said smiling with her head tilted to the right.

"Thank you Elenore." Vanessa said with a smile on her face.

"Oh by the way I saw the look on your face when Limelda said what she said. What were you thinking Elenore?" Vanessa said mischievously.

"Me?! Your face was just as red as mine." Elenore said somewhat defensively.

"Ah ha! You admitted it, now what naughty little thoughts you were thinking there Elenore?" Vanessa asked while gently poking Elenore in the ribs.

Elenore giggled as she tried to get away from Vanessa's finger. "All right I'll tell, just stop poking me."

Vanessa stopped poking Elenore and then Elenore deftly stepped back to the doorway and said with one eyebrow raised, her head tilted and with warm but mischievous smile; "Well, it would be very rude, to tell you what I was really thinking. But I did mean it when I said you're intelligent and beautiful and I do find you very attractive." Elenore looked down the hall. "I had better get back, before something else happens." With that Elenore scooted down the hall and back toward downstairs.

Vanessa stood there in shock for a few seconds and then said to herself with a smile on her face.

"Did she just say what I thought she said? Thank you Elenore, that was very kind of you." Then she went out and raced down the hall hoping to catch Elenore.

"Elenore..." Vanessa said in the hallway hoping to stop Elenore before she went downstairs.

Elenore stopped long enough for Vanessa to catch up. "Yes Vanessa?" Vanessa caught up with Elenore and gave her a warm hug. "That was very sweet what you said back there, thank you. But I didn't know you had feelings for me too."

Elenore tried to keep her face from blushing. "You're welcome. To be honest with you, I didn't know how you felt about me or knew my orientation so I kept it to myself."

Vanessa was about to answer when they both heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Without Vanessa or Elenore momentarily around, Margaret suddenly felt rather uncomfortable around the two gunslingers' presence. Not like anything about Madlax made her feel uneasy, but Limelda had this very strong intimidating presence to her, scary even.

Also, with Limelda there and the others away she did feel like an outsider who could not understand these two women's world very well. She wasn't sure what to say at the moment, for she felt Limelda didn't want to be disturbed with casual talking and she'd just avoid what she didn't want to talk about. It might also have been just her imagination but Margaret felt like they actually wanted to be alone for some reason. Conveniently, she was getting quite sleepy now, so she wished them both good night and excused herself, going upstairs to her room.

On her way up she noticed Vanessa and Elenore at the top of the stairs, talking about something she didn't hear clearly. They stopped talking and turned to her when they noticed her. "Oh, so this is where you two were!" Margaret said happily, already showing signs of her sleepiness. "I'm going to sleep now, so good night!" She told them both, closing her eyes as she gave them a smile and passing them into the direction of her room. "Oh, there's one thing... I needed to ask you Vanessa..." She turned back looking at the older woman. "I really hope that you're not upset that I asked Limelda to stay, are you? I just thought it'd be tough for anyone to sleep outside, and since we have enough rooms... Also, she is... Madlax's friend, I guess..." She hesitated. "Hmm... are you angry?" She asked nervously, lowering her head and looking rather apologetic.

Vanessa smiled and shook her head. "No Margaret, I'm not. I know you were just being kind hearted as usual. So don't worry, okay and good night Margaret." She hugged Margaret reassuringly and watched her she went to her room.

"Good night, Miss. Sleep well." Elenore said smiling glad that Margaret interrupted their conversation.

"Good night Elenore." Margaret replied getting even sleepier.

As Margaret went into her room and closed the room behind her, Vanessa turned to Elenore and said.

"Before we were interrupted, I was going to say you're my friend and I love you just the way you are. Actually I'm quite flattered that you thought of me in that way. I truly do hope you do find someone who loves you for you and wants share your happiness with you." Vanessa looked down the stairs with some sadness and concern. "Now I have to do something about my happiness." She was about to go down the stairs when she could hear Limelda talking to Madlax.

Meanwhile downstairs Margaret had just left leaving the pair alone. Limelda turned to Madlax and said with some anger and sadness in her voice. "Why Madlax? Why must you be with that woman? You and I have so much more in common. What does she have that I don't? What do you see in her Madlax? Tell me, please!"

Madlax felt deeply torn and stretched by the question Limelda posed to her. It was a question she wished she could avoid, for she loved both women in her own way. She wanted to be loved by both but felt she will be loved by neither one. Madlax pulled her eyes out to the night sky, staring into the blue and red moon appearing from the mist and hoping to avoid this as long as possible. "Well, Madlax well?" Limelda asked impatiently. Madlax took a deep breath and blurted her soul "Yes our existences are far more alike, but I like her because she isn't like us Limelda! She has strong ideals, she isn't self-righteous like many Nafrecan people and she's tender and warm."

Limelda was feeling rather indignant and arose from her chair. "Well wasn't I warm, Madlax? The way I held you closely at night? No?" Limelda whispered as she stroked her hand softly on her back. "You can't live in her world can you? It's too different, isn't it?" Limelda asked in a rather rhetorical tone.

"I don't know, I don't know..." Madlax said melancholically. "I like you too Limelda. Please don't make me choose! Please don't make me choose!" Madlax said as she laid her sorrowful head onto the table as teardrops ran across her cheek.

Vanessa's face saddened as she heard the conversation. "Are you all right Vanessa?" Elenore quietly asked with concern. "I'll be fine, thanks Elenore." Vanessa replied.

"I have to go check outside and see how much damage has been done and see if I have to call the police." Elenore said knowing not to push the issue further.

Vanessa looked at Elenore with some concern. "Are you going to be okay out there?" She asked.

"I'll be fine, nothing's happened within the last hour or so. So I assume our "visitors" have left for the night." Elenore said reassuringly.

Vanessa nodded and they both went down the stairs and back to the tea party.

"Miss Jorg, your room is ready. I'll show you after I've checked outside." Elenore said to Limelda and then looking at all three said. "I would like to remind you all you are guests here, please refrain from any violence in here. There's been enough of it tonight. Now if you please excuse me." Elenore then went out to the garden.

Inwardly Vanessa smiled. "*Thanks Elenore...*" She thought to herself and when Elenore went outside she then turned towards Limelda and Madlax. She saw Madlax's head on the table and then turned to Limelda. "Was that really necessary? Why can't you leave her alone?" Vanessa snapped at Limelda.

"Because she's like me and she has no place in your world." Limelda snapped back. "How can you say that? Did you ever consider that she might want something different other than a life of violence?"

Vanessa asked angrily.

"It's what she's good at and you want to make her into something she's not. I understand her, how could you ever understand?" Limelda shot back.

"Please stop arguing, please..." Madlax softly interrupted Limelda and Vanessa. There was an eerie and concerned silence; both women understood this will have to be resolved later. "What is normal? What is normal for me?" She spoke to herself quietly. "Are you alright?" Vanessa asked with Limelda staring in a worried paralysis. "I'll be okay" Madlax said in a quiet but assuring voice, although the tears were still candidly visible and the tone distinctly sad. "I'll go to bed now, goodnight." Madlax spoke as she walked slowly with head drooped low towards her bedroom.

Elenore looked around the garden. She could hear the argument between Limelda and Vanessa. "I hope Vanessa and Madlax are going to be all right." Elenore said to herself as she looked but she could find no sign of the battle other than minor scratches.

"Hmmp... Well at least our "visitors" know how to clean up after themselves." Elenore said to herself as she looked back at the house. If Elenore knew what would happen in the next days, she wouldn't have been so casual with her comment. Then again hindsight was a bigger bitch than normalcy or reality could ever be. It was a total bastard...

Elenore came back into the house. The arguing had stopped and she saw Madlax go upstairs. She waited till Madlax had gone into her room before showing Limelda her room.

"Please Miss Jorg. If you are ready I can show you to your room now." Elenore said politely. Limelda nodded and followed Elenore to her room. After she showed Limelda her room; Elenore then came back down and started clearing the table. She noticed Vanessa sitting at the table with a very sad look on her face.

"Vanessa, are you all right?" Elenore asked with great concern.

"I'll be fine, I just need to sit here for a bit and think. Thank you again Elenore." Vanessa replied.

Elenore looked at Vanessa with concern. "Maybe you should get some sleep. I'm going to be here a while cleaning up."

"You're welcome, but isn't that what friends do for each other?" Elenore answered in return.

Vanessa smiled a little and said. "Yes...Yes they do..." With that Elenore continued to clean up.

After a nearly a half hour later Elenore had finished she saw Vanessa still sitting there thinking.

"I'm done now. Are you ready to go to bed?" Elenore asked Vanessa snapping her out her reflection.

"Oh. So soon... sure...okay." Vanessa said and with that Elenore showed her to her room.

"Now you get some sleep. I'm sure things will work themselves out Vanessa." Elenore warmly said before Vanessa went into her room and Vanessa smiled and gave Elenore a warm hug and said. "Good night Elenore and thanks again."

"You're welcome and good night Vanessa." Elenore said as Vanessa closed the door and Elenore went to her own room.

When she got inside she looked at the picture of her grandfather and said with some melancholy;" Well grandpa, I've gotten myself into another mess and I don't know how to fix it. What would've you've done in this situation?" After a few minutes staring at the picture, she got undressed and got ready for bed and went to sleep wondering what the next day would bring.

Chapter 6. A perchance to dream

In a quiet hotel room Kirika quietly sat on the bed watching the news on the television.

“Earlier today the sentencing of former C.E.O of Bookwald’s Gazth-Sonika division began. His full role in the Gazth-Sonika civil war is still under investigation...” A stolid anchorman with a plastic smile said before Kirika turned off the television.

“They’ll never find the whole truth...” Kirika said to herself.

“But that won’t stop some fool from trying...” Mireille said with a touch of melancholy emerging from the bathroom.

“They’ll end up dead...”

“Enfant’s legacy isn’t our problem...Now let’s get some sleep, long day tomorrow.”

“What about the Soldats?” Kirika asked.

“We’ll leave before dawn and take the train.”

Kirika nodded and placed the remote on the nightstand and got into bed.

Mireille got into bed soon after and turned out the light.

“Night Kirika.”

“Good Night Mireille.”

The pair was soon asleep.

Later that night at Burton Manor, Margaret tossed and turned briefly then she stopped moving.

Margaret found herself in the dining room with the smell of pasta and sauce cooking wafting through the air. She smiled when she smelt the cooking.

“Am I dreaming?” She asked her.

“Oh, I assure you are Margaret Burton.” A voice answered similar to hers, but with a Welsh accent.

“Where are you? I can’t see you.” Margaret cried out.

“Oh, sorry about that.” To Margaret’s surprise, sitting at opposite end of the table was her or at least that’s what she thought, except she was wearing a ruby red dress and motioning her to sit. Margaret sat in the chair opposite of her.

“Who are you? Are you me?” Margaret asked still a bit befuddled.

“I thought that was explained earlier. But I see another introduction is in order. I am Queen Rhiannon or at least part of me that’s being channeled through the Torc.”

“Then why do you look like me?” Margaret asked a little less confused.

Rhiannon thought for a few nanoseconds and then she smiled. “Now that’s for you to figure out.”

Margaret frowned and then replied. “Why me? Why choose me?”

“That I can answer; in your case it’s because of the “Gift”. That drew me to you, granted I had to use your friend Vanessa to get to you. Anything else you’ll just have to figure out.” Rhiannon replied with a warm smile.

“Can I ask for help?” Margaret asked a bit daunted.

“Of course, you can ask your family and friends for help. But ultimately it will be up to you to figure out why.” Rhiannon said reassuringly and a plate of pasta with red sauce appeared before Margaret.

“Rest well Margaret Burton...” Rhiannon said before leaving Margaret to the pasta.

The Torc glowed slightly as Rhiannon stretched out her conscious. She could see the psychic residue all over the house both good and evil. She grinned as she saw Laetitia psychically talking to Poupee. She was going to observe the Alice in Wonderland themed dream that Vanessa was having when she noticed the chain coming from Laetitia. Apparently Laetitia didn’t notice it nor did Poupee. Following to where the chain led, she saw Elenore running through a jungle then on her laying on a morgue slab being dissected or eviscerated in case. Rhiannon was going to intervene but she was delayed by a tug on her

dress. She turned to see a slightly chubby little girl no older than seven or eight years old smiling at her and she smiled back.

Rhiannon bent down to eye level to the child. "Well, you saved me a bit of time little one."

"Really?" The little girl replied a bit surprised.

"Yes really." Rhiannon replied but before she could say more Elenore woke in a cold sweat.

"Why is she so sad? Did I make her sad?" The little girl asked as Elenore got of bed.

"No little one. You didn't, there are other reasons she is sad."

"Did the other people make her sad?" The little girl asked.

"No. She can't see people like us."

"Oh." The little girl replied in surprise.

"Do you want to come with me?" Rhiannon asked and the little girl smiled feeling safe around her.

"Let's go then..." As Rhiannon held out her hand and the little girl placed hers in it. Then the pair left Elenore to herself oblivious to the conversation that just happened right next to her.

Elenore woke in a cold sweat. She tried to close her eyes and go back to sleep but found that she couldn't. So she got of bed and pulled a set of keys from her apron pocket.

Then she went out of the room and down the hall.

A minute later she was in the kitchen. She turned on a small light near the stove and grabbed the timer sitting nearby. Setting the timer she placed on the table and went to the liquor cabinet. Unlocking it, she scanned for a glass and a bottle of Irish whiskey. Sitting down with the glass and bottle, she stared at the empty glass. Feelings of helplessness filled her as she silently wished she didn't have to do this but this was the only thing she knew that made the nightmares go away. The events of earlier this evening didn't help as she poured filling the glass. Then raising it, she stared at it and then she took a drink...